



Miraijin A
Art by jimmy

3

As a Reincarnated
ARISTOCRAT,
I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to
Rise in the World





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The lord of House Louvent.
Possesses the power of
Appraisal, and has a
remarkable eye for people.

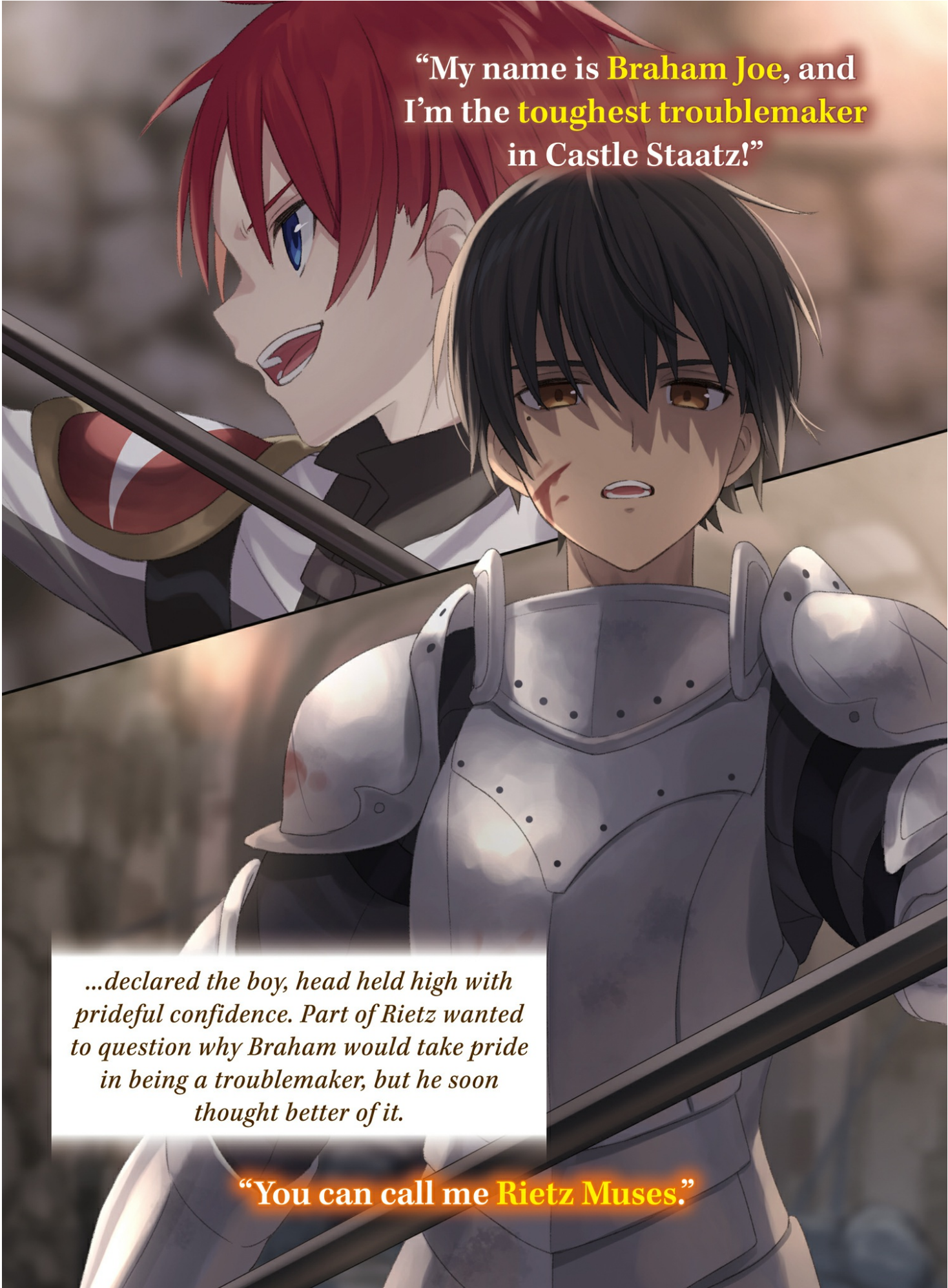
**“I nominate the
kiddo I work for to
handle the job,”**

*said Mireille before
Couran could reach a
decision, much to my
bemusement.*



An exceptionally
talented tactician who Ars
recruited to serve his cause.





“My name is **Braham Joe**, and
I’m the **toughest troublemaker**
in Castle Staatz!”

*...declared the boy, head held high with
prideful confidence. Part of Rietz wanted
to question why Braham would take pride
in being a troublemaker, but he soon
thought better of it.*

“You can call me **Rietz Muses**.”

As a Reincarnated **Aristocrat,**

I'll Use My Appraisal Skill
to Rise in the World

3

By Miraijin A

Illustrations by jimmy

Translated by Tristan K. Hill



KODANSHA

As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World 3

A VERTICAL Book

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Contents

Prologue

Chapter 1: The Battle of Castle Rolto

Chapter 2: The Battle of Castle Staatz

Chapter 3: Victory

Epilogue

Side Story: Rietz Muses the Mercenary



Prologue

“The invasion of Velshdt has begun. I know that you’re all up to the task, and I’ll be expecting you to give it your best,” I, Ars Louvent, said to my assembled retainers.

“I would put my very life on the line for your sake if the circumstances called for it, Lord Ars,” replied Rietz. “The conquest of Velshdt will be a pivotal step toward our ultimate victory in this war. We can be certain that our accomplishments will earn you the fame and respect you deserve, and as such, I will spare no effort!”

Rietz was far and away the most devoted out of all my retainers, and the most capable to boot. I had absolute faith in his abilities.

“My magic’ll make this a piece of cake,” said Charlotte. Her confidence was well and good, but I couldn’t help but think she was taking our upcoming battles a little too lightly. On the other hand, her magic *was* almost unimaginably powerful, and she was right in the sense that it would be a major asset in battle.

“I think the pressure’s gonna kill me... Oh, god, my stomach,” groaned Rosell, who looked pallid. His tactical genius was unfortunately accompanied by an inclination toward catastrophic pessimism—in short, he had his strong points and weak points.

“You should try to relax a little, Rosell,” I said, in the hopes of alleviating some of his tension.

“Th-This is going to be an *incredibly* important stage of the war! We can’t afford to lose, and that means we can’t afford to relax for even a second!” Rosell snapped.

“Kid’s got a point,” added Mireille with an air of knowing authority. “You can never tell what’s gonna happen on the battlefield, no matter how hard you think through the situation.”

Mireille had the most experience in the field out of all my retainers, and her stats were remarkably high as well. The one issue that kept me from putting too much faith in her was her personality. She had quirks, to say the least.

It struck me that I was wrapped up in a situation that was out of my league, considering what my previous life had been like. Before my reincarnation I was just your everyday white-collar office worker in Japan. With that in mind, the idea of me becoming a baron in another world and leading an army into a battle with the fate of the whole duchy on the line was just absurd. I wasn’t built for this sort of drama, and every once in a while the whole scenario felt surreal beyond description. I didn’t have a choice, though: I’d been born into the aristocracy, and that meant I had to do everything in my power to fulfill my role.

○

A soldier burst into the meeting room in Castle Velshdt, the single most important strategic location in all of the County of Velshdt. “News from Samkh!” he shouted. “The castle has fallen, and is occupied by the enemy!”

The Count of Velshdt, Kanes Bandle, had been in the middle of a war council at the time, but the soldier now had his full attention. “Th-That can’t be,” he muttered. “First Vakmakro fell with stunning speed, and now Castle Samkh has suffered the same fate...?”

Castle Samkh was not a fully-fortified citadel, but it was situated in a more

defensible location than Fort Vakmakro. It had also been defended by Kanes's very own cousin, Fredore, a man in whom Kanes had the utmost of faith. For the castle to have fallen nigh instantaneously was news that exceeded even the most pessimistic scenarios Kanes had considered.

"Well, that's a setback I sure didn't see coming... Do we know anything about how the castle fell?" asked Thomas Grunzeon, a master tactician who had been dispatched to aid in the defense of Velshdt.

"I'm afraid not, Your Lordship!" replied the soldier. "We were told the castle fell, but nothing about how it happened."

"All right, then," said Thomas with a nod. "It's only a matter of time before the specifics find their way to us...but I'd bet the enemy has a skilled spy in their number."

"A spy?" repeated Kanes.

"It doesn't add up otherwise. The castle wouldn't have fallen so fast without a man inside," said Thomas.

"But surely Fredore would have ensured his castle was defended against such sabotage?" asked Kanes.

"He probably had," Thomas admitted. "I'd bet he just didn't do *enough*."

"Hmm. Then perhaps we should redouble our own defenses in that regard," said Kanes with a thoughtful frown. "Speaking of Fredore, what happened to him? Does he still live?"

"The Count was captured by the enemy," said the soldier. "He may live, or he may have been executed."

"I see," Kanes sighed.

“A man like Fredore would be a valuable hostage,” Thomas noted. “I think there’s a good chance they’d keep him alive, just in case.”

A subtle hint of relief flashed across Kanes’s face. He was fond of his cousin, and would have been bereaved to learn of his passing.

“Thomas,” Kanes said, “what do you believe our enemy’s next move will be?”

“Conventional tactics would call for a swift assault on Castle Staatz. That’d give them a solid staging ground to take on the rest of the county from, and they know we weren’t prepared for Samkh to fall that quickly. They’ll be looking to take advantage of our lowered guard and rush in before we’ve finished preparing for their assault.”

“In which case it would behoove us to prepare our forces to mount a defense as soon as possible,” said Kanes.

“That’s the ticket,” agreed Thomas with a nod. “The good news is that if they make the moves I’m expecting them to, we’ll have a decent shot at winning this.”

“How so?”

“The faster you march an army like theirs, the more openings you end up leaving for a surprise attack to catch you off guard.”

“I see. And if I recall, such ambushes are your specialty.”

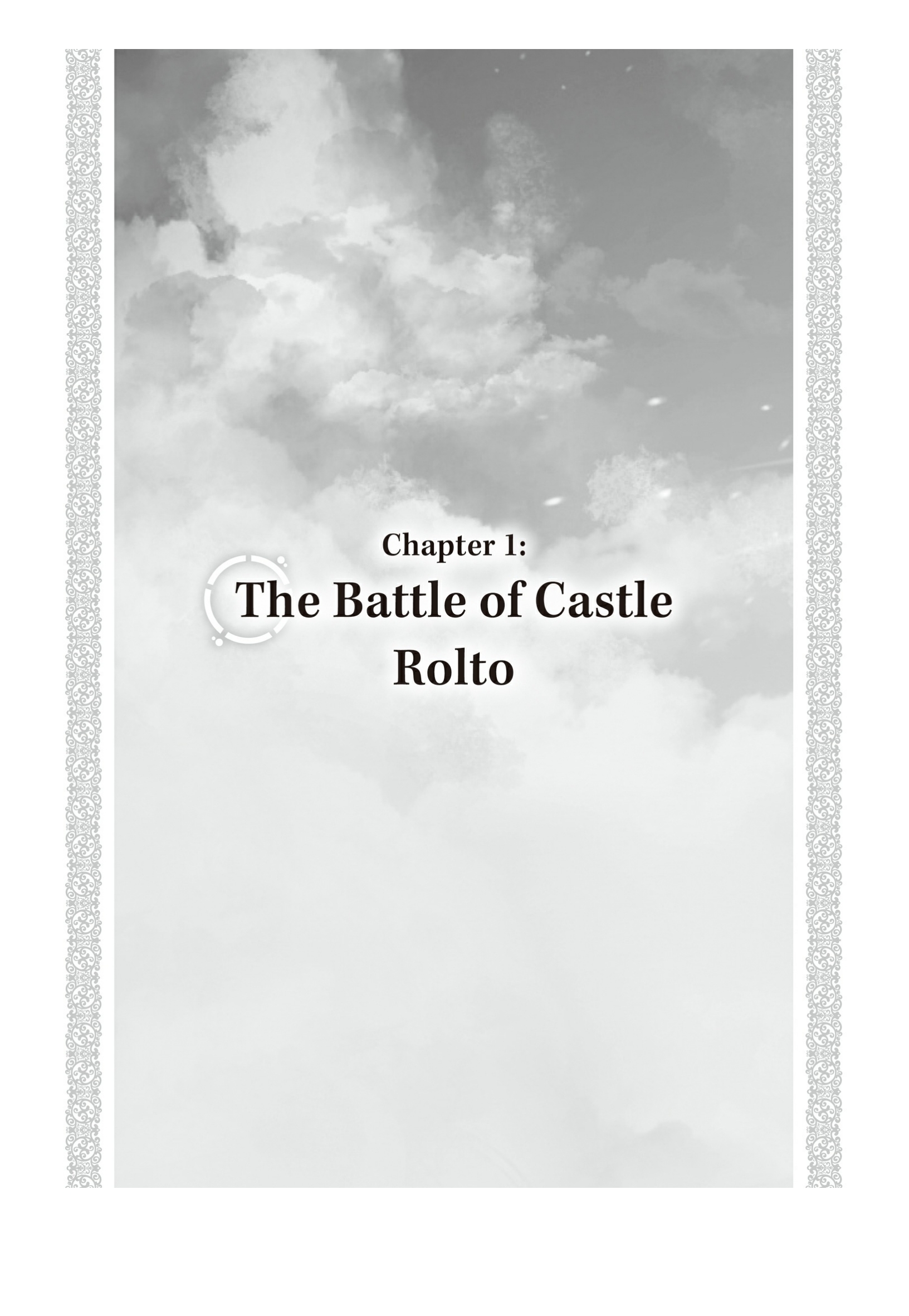
“Right. I don’t know if I’d be able to take out Couran himself, but I should be able to sever their supply chain and bring their advance to a standstill.”

“We’re blessed to have a man with your skills on our side,” said Kanes. He’d been worried that Samkh’s sudden fall would spell the imminent end of his rule, but Thomas’s reassurances made him feel a slight resurgence of hope.

“There’s no guarantee that the enemy’ll rush in like I’m hoping, though. Some of them probably know that surprise attacks are my standard procedure, and there’s a chance they’ll be on guard as well. If that ends up being the case, they’ll either move in at a more normal pace or try to pull some other maneuver,” Thomas said, then sank into thought for a moment. “To start, we should make sure we’re prepared to deal with any spies that try to slip their way in. We’ll send troops to the forts near the front, too, and have them prepare for battle posthaste. After that, well, that depends on what sort of new info comes in.”

“Understood. I’ll send word to the commanders of every fort at once,” said Kanes, then hurried off to begin penning his messages. In them, he included notes regarding Castle Samkh’s fall, the fact that they should be prepared for an imminent invasion, and that they should be extra alert for the possibility of spies. Finally, he added that any information regarding the enemy should be relayed to him at once.

Velshdt’s soldiers were few in number, but their preparations for a long, painful defense had begun nonetheless.



Chapter 1:

The Battle of Castle Rolto

The execution of the prisoners we'd captured during our conquest of Castle Samkh was carried out within the castle itself. It was a gruesome scene, but I'd witnessed enough horrors since the war began that I was starting to get a little used to them. I knew that I couldn't let myself be shaken by that sort of thing if I was going to get by as a noble in this world, so I decided to think of my desensitization as a good thing—though on the other hand, I knew that I couldn't let myself get *too* desensitized and start being unaffected by death.

As for my next moves, I requested that the Shadows gather information throughout the County of Velshdt. I considered having them look into Castle Staatz, but ended up deciding to have them check out the important strategic locations between us and the castle first.

Assaulting Castle Staatz right after our conquest of Castle Samkh would be impossible, given the current state of things. The County of Velshdt had a number of highly-defensible forts spread throughout it, and if we rushed ahead and let our guards down, it was very possible we'd find our advance stymied. And so, I told the Shadows to get me information on all the castles and forts we'd need to take down before we could march on Castle Staatz proper.

That bit of reconnaissance aside, our forces were occupied with wiping out the remaining resistance in the County of Samkh, as we'd previously planned. There weren't many enemy soldiers left, thankfully, and gaining total control over the county didn't take long at all. Before I knew it, the county had fallen into Couran's hands, and it was time for us to turn our attention to the conquest of Velshdt in earnest. Led by Couran, the bulk of our forces sallied forth from Castle Samkh, and needless to say, I was part of that group.

Our first step toward conquering Velshdt was taking over a stronghold called Fort Valdsen. The fort was located in close proximity to the border with Samkh, and if we managed to claim it, it would serve as an excellent staging ground for the rest of the invasion. The one problem, however, was that Fort Valdsen was far from poorly defended. Not only were its fortifications sound, but it was watched over by a commander who was well known for his competence.

When we stopped to rest partway through our march, Couran called his commanding officers together for a council.

“A frontal assault would cost us, but I’m afraid I see no other option,” he said as he solicited us for advice.

So far, Couran’s invasion had progressed with a rather low rate of casualties. On top of that, a fair number of the common soldiers from regions we’d already conquered had joined us. In total, we actually had *more* soldiers on our side than we’d started with. Staging a frontal assault would have its fair share of advantages—the most important of which was the speed with which it could be carried out—but we were sure to lose plenty of men in the process. Couran, it seemed, felt that at the present moment we were more pressed for time than we were for troops.

“Losing a few troops here and there might not be a disaster, but if we want to take down Fort Valdsen head-on, we’re also gonna need to expend a hell of a lot of aqua magia,” commented Mireille. “That’s something you should keep in mind.”

A frontal assault would involve a similar tactic to the one we’d used to bring down Fort Vakmakro: blasting a hole in the outer walls with powerful siege magic, then storming in through that opening. Vakmakro’s unimpressive magical defenses and Charlotte’s superlative magical talent had enabled the

tactic to be quite effective back then, but Fort Valdsen was supposedly much more prepared to ward off that sort of assault. It would take an awful lot of high-level magic to pierce through the fort's defenses, and that would involve using up a ton of aqua magia.

"I also believe we should keep our aqua magia expenditures at a minimum," chimed in Rietz. "After all, there's no telling how much of it our enemies may be holding in reserve."

"Aqua magia, is it?" Couran muttered as he furrowed his brow. "I'll grant you the point, but the fact remains that we have little in the way of alternative options. Would you have us lay siege to the fort? I'm sure you realize we don't have that sort of time to spare."

"While we're on that subject," said Rosell, "I'm guessing that Fort Valdsen's commander is operating under orders to stall us for as long as possible. I doubt that he'll be inclined to go on the offensive, considering the circumstances."

That made the prospect of siege warfare even less appealing. If a fort's defenders never chose to rush out for an attack, it could take an interminable amount of time for them to run out of resources and be forced to give up. Under the current circumstances, a siege just wasn't an option for us.

"Well, if a direct assault would be too costly and a siege too lengthy, what would you propose as a better option?" asked Couran.

"Seems to me that we should look into taking over the fort without fighting at all," said Mireille.

Taking over the fort without fighting?

In other words, I presumed, she was suggesting we find a way to convince the fort's defenders to join our side. In the best case, that would allow us to secure

victory without spilling a drop of blood or wasting an excess of time.

“Is that feasible?” asked Couran.

“Hard to say,” replied Mireille with a shrug. “Seems worth giving it a try, though. The enemy knows they’re fighting at a disadvantage, and I’m sure some of them aren’t interested in dying in vain. And in the worst case, we can just go for a frontal assault when subterfuge fails.”

“A fair point indeed,” said Couran. “Perhaps there is merit to making an attempt. I am convinced—we will begin by making an effort to coax the enemy into defecting and supporting our cause.”

With that decided, our next step was to figure out who would be responsible for carrying out the scheme. “Does anyone have a proposal for who would be well-suited to bringing the enemy around?” asked Couran.

One by one, the assembled nobles stepped up to volunteer themselves for the task. A few of them claimed to be acquaintances with the commander of Fort Valdsen, and I assumed Couran was likely to choose one of them.

“I nominate the kiddo I work for to handle the job,” said Mireille before Couran could reach a decision, much to my bemusement.

“Wait, why me?” I asked.

“Because you’ve got a real knack for negotiations,” said Mireille. “Plus, your power could give you some insight into what the guy wants from us, don’t you think?”

“My power doesn’t make me all-knowing!” I snapped back, though in truth, the enemy commander’s Ambition score *would* give me a degree of insight into whether or not it would be possible to convince him to sell out his current lord. If his Ambition was low, I’d know that we’d have to dangle a very tempting

incentive in front of him to make him even consider the proposal.

“Ars is an indispensable asset to my army,” said Couran. “I am less than inclined to send him out to participate in negotiations that could prove dangerous.”

“They don’t have to be, though,” said Mireille. “Why not start by sending a letter saying you want to talk with their commander? If he’s open to that, we can start the real negotiations. Knowing he’s willing to talk to us at all will let us know if it’s even worth trying to bring him over to our side, and if he agrees to the talks in advance, I have a hard time imagining he’ll murder our negotiator.”

“Nevertheless, we can’t rule out the possibility he’ll take such an extreme step,” pointed out Couran.

“If we were that obsessed with worst-case scenarios, we wouldn’t be sending the kid out onto the battlefield either,” countered Mireille.

“Hmm,” said Couran, once again lapsing into thought.

Mireille was as silver-tongued as ever, and had backed him into a corner. I, meanwhile, was beside myself with worry that she’d go a step too far and infuriate him. Part of me wanted to tell her that if she had that much of a way with words she should just go handle it on her own, but on the other hand, I could imagine her insulting the enemy commander to his face and ruining the negotiations before they even began.

“What are your thoughts on the matter, Ars?” asked Couran, turning to me next.

I wasn’t sure how dangerous the task would be, honestly, but I was certain that the points Mireille had made were sound. We stood to gain quite a lot if we managed to pull the mission off, and Couran had proven generous with

monetary rewards for that sort of accomplishment in the past. I was never one to turn down the chance to make some money, but the question was whether or not I could manage it. Frankly, I wasn't at all sure I was up to the task.

I was worried that failure would lower Couran's opinion of me, of course, but more than that, I was worried that screwing this up would delay the conquest of Velshdt. Considering that my biggest goal was to win this war as fast as possible, it didn't make sense to overextend myself in search of glory if that meant risking a delay. I was leaning toward leaving it up to one of the nobles who was acquainted with the enemy leader...but when I paused to take a closer look at the nobles in question, I noticed that all of them had high Valor but low Politics scores. Suddenly, I found myself doubting whether they could handle the job on a basic level.

We did have people with high Politics scores on our side—there was Robinson, for one thing—so it didn't seem necessary for me to play a part. However, I had a feeling that my Appraisal skill would be at least *somewhat* useful in this sort of under-the-table negotiation. I soon came to the conclusion that it would be best to send me along with one of the nobles who knew the commander, or maybe Robinson, and have me serve as the primary negotiator's support.

"I'm willing to take on the task," I said, "but I don't think that I'm capable of succeeding alone. That being said, if I had someone like Sir Robinson or an acquaintance of the enemy leader along with me, I believe we may be able to accomplish this mission."

"Hmm—so you wish for Robinson to lend you his aid?" Couran asked, then paused to consider my proposal. "I'll grant you that sending Robinson would improve the odds of your success, but at the same time, it would make our losses all the greater should negotiations fail... Though I suppose that sending

someone the commander knows would lessen the likelihood he would choose to slay the lot of you. Nevertheless, I shall have to assign a skilled guard to accompany you.”

It seemed to me that Couran had made up his mind, and as I suspected, it wasn't long before he'd drafted a letter to send to Fort Valdsen. That was our attempt to test the waters, in a sense. If the enemy commander literally killed the messenger, we'd know there was no choice but to claim the fort by force. The messenger, however, returned in short order.

“The leader of the forces at Fort Valdsen, Lord Ruper, is willing to engage in talks with us,” the messenger reported.

The talks were set to take place on enemy grounds, and we wouldn't be allowed to bring our weapons with us. I had a sword—not that I could use it—which was taken from me before the negotiations began. I wasn't excited about the idea of our group being unarmed, but I was told that the enemy's party would be leaving their weapons behind as well, which made me feel at least a little more secure. This meant that the escort Couran assigned to us was disarmed as well, of course, but I figured that if they were as tough as he seemed to think they were, they wouldn't need weapons to protect us if worst came to worst.

In spite of all those precautions, the talks weren't to be held within the enemy fort itself. We'd be meeting their party in a garden just outside of the fort's front gates. It seemed the idea was that this would serve as safe ground, where we'd be able to tell immediately if anyone nearby was armed.

A round table had been set up in the middle of the garden, before which a middle-aged man was sitting. As we approached, he stood up and spoke.

“Well met,” said the man. “It is good to see you once more, Sir Volance.”

“Likewise, Sir Ruper,” said Volance, the noble who’d been sent along with us on account of him knowing Ruper. That exchange confirmed to me that we were speaking with the fort’s commanding officer. Apparently, Volance and Ruper had fought side by side in some conflict in the past. They weren’t friends, per se, but they were at least acquaintances, and their connection was the least tenuous option available to us.

“Would the men behind you be Sir Robinson and Sir Ars?” asked Ruper.

“That is correct,” confirmed Volance.

Ruper gave me a quizzical look, which was understandable, considering I was very conspicuously still a child. My presence here was odd, especially knowing how important these talks would be. To Ruper’s credit, though, he didn’t choose to voice his doubts, instead directing us to have a seat. I obliged, then appraised him.

The usual status window popped up right away...or so I thought, but an instant later the writing was obscured as the window was filled with what looked like TV static. A jolt of surprise ran through me—had I lost the ability to use my skill?—but thankfully, just a moment later, the window returned to its normal appearance.

What the heck was that? I wondered. Nothing of the sort had ever happened before, but since I could read his stats now, I decided to try not to obsess over it and keep my head in the moment. I shook the surprise off, then gave Ruper’s stats a look.

Ruper Roozton

Age: 32

Male

Status:

LEA: 84/89

VAL: 54/54

INT: 83/88

POL: 78/80

Ambition: 70

Aptitudes:

Infantry: D

Cavalry: C

Archer: D

Mage: D

Fortification: A

Weaponry: B

Naval: C

Aerial: C

Strategy: B

Ruper's stats were nothing to sneeze at, and his ambition was on the higher side of things. That explained why he'd been willing to talk with the enemy in the first place. I figured that a man as capable as he was, with an Ambition as high as his, might very well be less than satisfied with the hand his superiors had dealt him in this war.

Now that I knew his stats, I just had to figure out how to use that as a tool in our negotiations. I didn't know how useful my insight was, but at the very least I'd be able to see through to his true Ambition even if he was the type who'd

make an effort to hide it.



As far as the rest of his stats went, his Valor was low, but everything else was high across the board. I could tell he wasn't the sort of person who'd fight on the front lines. That plus his high Ambition gave me an image of a careful, thoughtful man who harbored quite the scheming nature deep down. If I was right, then as long as we laid out the merits of betraying his current master, he would be willing to jump ship. He *was* fighting at an undeniable disadvantage, after all.

Couran had given us a summary of the perks we could use to lure him to our side, the most major of which was offering him a position as count after the invasion was over. Once Vasmarque and his followers were defeated, a number of Missianite counties would be bereft of their counts, and Rupert would be able to step in to take one of their places. Our allies probably wouldn't be happy about that position being handed off to a former foe, but in Couran's mind, the immediate benefits outweighed that long-term issue. With an offer like that on the table it seemed there'd be no good reason for him to turn down our proposal...but I wasn't convinced it'd be that easy.

The negotiations began with a period of perfunctory small talk between Rupert and Volance. I could tell in an instant that they didn't know each other very well, just from the way they spoke to each other. Before long, Robinson seized an opportunity to step in and steer the conversation toward our true objective. When he proposed that Rupert join forces with us, though, Rupert's response came swiftly.

"I have sworn loyalty to Lord Vasmarque and Lord Kanses," said Rupert. "As such, I am afraid I must humbly decline your offer."

I couldn't tell if he was turning us down because he couldn't bring himself to take the offer, or because he thought we wouldn't trust him if he jumped on

the offer without hesitation. Robinson followed up by explaining that we could guarantee him a position as count should he accept, but that did nothing to sway him.

What's there not to like about the deal? I figured someone with as high of an Ambition as him would be dead set on moving up in the world, I thought. It just didn't make sense. If his compunctions were so strong he'd never betray his current master, then why had he agreed to the negotiations in the first place? Was he putting on a front, and secretly wavering deep down? Or maybe he doubted our sincerity? If he was as cautious as he seemed, then he might have harbored the suspicion that Couran would sooner cut him loose and pretend the deal never happened than appoint Ruper to his promised position and risk inciting the wrath of his other subordinates.

What could we do to gain his trust, though? Maybe we could sign the agreement in blood, or something? Couran had expressed a willingness to offer some extreme incentives if it would lure Ruper onto our side, so surely he'd be willing to spare a spoonful of blood or two for the cause! And if that failed, well, the only idea I could come up with was just arguing the man into submission. Robinson and Volance both seemed to be drawing a blank on that front, so I was going to have to step in and take the lead.

"Are you, perhaps, unconvinced that you'll be offered the position of count in the end?" I asked.

"No, that is not the issue at hand. You see, I do not wish to be a traitor," said Ruper, but not before hesitating for just a moment. That told me that he was questioning his decision.

"I assure you, Lord Ruper, that Lord Couran proposed this offer in complete sincerity," I said. "He *will* keep his promise—I believe he would go so far as to

sign a blood oath to that effect, should you require it. In fact, I would be willing to ask him to do so at once, and I have every confidence that he will agree without hesitation.”

“Nevertheless—” Ruper began, but I wasn’t quite finished yet, so I cut him off before he could say another word.

“You should know, Lord Ruper, that Lord Couran is appalled at the thought that a man of your standing has been wasted on a fort like this. He told me as much himself.”

Ruper fell silent. If he hadn’t been wavering before, I was confident he was now. Finally, he spoke once more.

“Betraying my liege would be a stain upon my character. A man who is known as a traitor would have little hope of earning the trust of the citizens within his realm. I find myself questioning whether ascending to the position of count would hold any meaning under those circumstances,” he explained.

Oh, I get it—this is a question of reputation.

“I do not believe your good name would suffer at all, under these circumstances,” I explained. “At the moment, your force is beset by a far superior foe. Anyone could see that you stand no chance of victory, and most importantly, *you* were not responsible for putting yourself in this position. No, the fault lies with Vasmarque and Kances, the men who laid out the strategy for this county’s defense. If they intended to hold this fort, they would have sent reinforcements a long time ago, yet it seems to me that the Count of Velshdt has no intention of supplying any such support.”

The groundwork was laid. Now, I just had to strike the finishing blow.

“If I may presume to speculate upon your count’s intentions, I would guess

that he ordered you to buy time, and nothing more. In other words, he has chosen to sacrifice you. It pains me, Lord Ruper, to think that a man of your talents would be cast aside so flagrantly. Your superiors have failed in their judgment, and in doing so, they have failed *you*.”

Even I was surprised by just how fast the argument had come to me, and how eloquently I’d laid it out. Maybe being born into the aristocracy and speaking with so many different people over the course of my life had made me a better conversationalist? In any case, I told Ruper that we didn’t expect an immediate answer, and that we would give him two days to think our offer through. With that, our talks concluded—and from my perspective, they’d concluded favorably.

Two days passed by before I knew it.

“I expect we’ll receive Ruper’s response before long,” said Couran. “Do you believe he will choose to turn traitor, Ars?”

“At the very least, I felt like he was considering it,” I replied. By the end of my talk with him, it had seemed like Ruper was intrigued by the possibilities. I felt that, all things considered, I’d done a good job of using the information I’d gained about his personality and Ambition to convince him, and I thought there was a decent possibility that my efforts would bear fruit.

“Lord Couran!” shouted a soldier. “A messenger has arrived bearing word from Sir Ruper!”

“Good. Let him through,” said Couran.

The messenger was guided to us.

“Thank you for lending me your ear, Your Lordship,” he said. “Lord Ruper has requested that I inform you of his intent.”

I waited with bated breath. His next words would determine whether our plan

had failed or succeeded.

“His Lordship thought long and hard regarding the merits of your proposal,” said the messenger. “Although he owes a great deal to Lord Kanes, the Count of Velshdt, he also acknowledges the truth that as the eldest successor to the duke, Lord Couran bears a stronger claim to the duchy than Lord Vasmarque. In light of this fact, and in light of the fact that he holds a responsibility to ensure that his retainers and his family are not used as sacrificial pawns, Lord Ruper has decided to accept your proposal and fight beneath your banner. Fort Valdsen formally offers you its surrender, Lord Couran.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. Somehow, we’d pulled it off.

“Excellent!” said Couran. “The fort is ours, and we’ve barely expended any time or soldiers in the process! This is a major step toward our ultimate victory, and once again, we owe the achievement to you, Ars.”

“I didn’t contribute much,” I replied.

“Ha ha ha! Now’s not the time for humility! It’s the time to revel in our accomplishment—and to that end, let us pay our new fort a visit!” said Couran. He was clearly in the highest of spirits thanks to our stunning success.

Couran led our forces toward Fort Valdsen. There was still a chance that their surrender was a trap, so we proceeded with some caution, but when we arrived, we found the gates flung open. Ruper stood in the entryway alongside his now disarmed troops, and when they saw Couran approaching the fort they all bowed down in unison. It seemed they were making a formal gesture of surrender.

“I bid you welcome, Lord Couran,” said Ruper, maintaining his bow all the while. “I, Ruper Roozton, do hereby pledge my service to your cause and offer

up my men to supplement your forces.”

Couran didn't bother dismounting.

“Rise,” he commanded, then waited for Ruper and his men to look up at him before continuing. “I accept you and yours under my command. Henceforth, you shall fight under my banner to take Velshdt by storm and cast Vasmarque down from his pretender's throne!”

Ruper bowed once more and replied, “I will serve you to the best of my ability, Your Lordship!” he declared.

It seemed we didn't have to worry about a trap after all. On that day, Fort Valdsen fell to Couran without a fight.

○

Soon after the success of our scheme to lure Ruper and his men over to our side, it was decided that a banquet would be held in celebration. I ended up seated with my retainers, eating and drinking as we chatted away.

“You've outdone yourself this time, Lord Ars,” said Rietz.

“I just hope it's earned me a little credit from Lord Couran,” I replied. “In any case, it does feel like the tide of battle is turning in our favor, doesn't it?”

So far, our campaign had been a series of encounters almost entirely devoid of allied casualties. *Enemy* casualties, on the other hand, had been plentiful when they proved necessary, which wasn't even always the case. Couran had held the advantage in numbers to begin with, and that disparity had grown so much that it was starting to feel like the rest of the war would be a walk in the

park.

“This is no time to let our guards down,” said Rosell, almost as if he’d heard my thoughts and felt the need to dissuade me from them. “The enemy can’t afford to lose any more ground to us, and that means they’ll be fighting to the death from here on out. I think we’ll be seeing a *real* large-scale battle before much longer.”

“Meh,” chimed in Mireille. “A battle you can’t afford to lose is a battle you can’t afford to lose, no matter how many of ’em you’ve plowed through before it. That’s just how it goes in war, and we can’t afford to lose *any* of the battles we’re about to fight.”



She made it sound like the idea of her letting her guard down was absurd in the first place—though then again, she was also well on her way to drowning herself in booze, so she might’ve just been talking off the cuff.

I knew that participating in a large-scale battle would mean that the slightest mistake could lead to my death, and I was in no hurry to die. Especially considering I hadn’t lived that long yet! I resolved that keeping myself alive would have to be my top priority.

Some time later, I decided to appraise the newest additions to the army: Ruper’s men. I knew that recruiting someone who’d already sworn service to Couran was a lost cause, and it didn’t feel like I really had much to gain, but I also didn’t have anything to lose and decided there wouldn’t be any harm in giving them a check. When I appraised the first man, though, I was in for a shock.

“Huh?” I grunted as I looked at his status screen. It looked the same as ever for the most part, listing his name, sex, age, status, and aptitudes, but there, at the very bottom of the screen, a new block of info was displayed. For the first man I appraised, that block read: Born on the twentieth day of the eleventh month, 183 Imperial Era, in Millast, County of Velshdt, Duchy of Missian, Summerforth Empire. Has two older brothers and one younger sister. Father and mother are alive and well. Short-tempered, and loves dried meat. Enjoys horseback riding and fancies women in their forties and above. Has absolute faith in his lord and master, Ruper.

Suddenly, my skill gave me access to a massive quantity of personal information! I appraised a few other people...and was met with similar results. My skill, which had remained static in its effects for years, had gone through a significant evolution!

But why, though? And why now? I wondered. Was it based on the number of times I'd used it? Or perhaps my age? Maybe using my power to its fullest potential in the negotiations had bumped me over the edge? The change had been so abrupt, I couldn't pin down a concrete explanation. In retrospect, it seemed plausible that the odd glitch my skill had displayed when I appraised Ruper the other day was a warning sign that this was about to happen.

Whatever the reasoning behind the change, though, I had a wealth of new information at my disposal. I knew my new abilities could very well make future negotiations and attempts at subterfuge easier. Of course, it could *also* seriously creep people out if I used it without careful consideration, since it wouldn't exactly be a good look to know things about people that they'd never shared with you. I'd have to be extra cautious about that.

I also had a moment of hesitation when I tried to decide whether or not I should use my new power on my retainers. It seemed that the information block in the new status screens always reported on the individual's opinion of their current lord. Would it be all right for me to know what my own people thought of me?

This feels like it's skirting dangerously close to invasion-of-privacy territory... But then again, I do like the idea of knowing where their true loyalties lie... That seems like important information for a lord to have.

That settled it in my mind: I'd appraise my retainers and learn what they thought about me. I decided to start with Rietz, and took a look at his basic stats and growth while I was at it.

LEA: 97/99 VAL: 90/90 INT: 97/99 POL: 92/100

At long last, it seemed that all of his stats had made it into the nineties. His Valor was capped out, even! Rietz was a very diligent person, and I knew for a fact that he'd never let up on his training, which seemed to be paying off well for him.

All right, now for the important part—let's see what the new section says about him...

Rietz's lower status read: Born on the thirtieth day of the fifth month, 189 Imperial Era, in Redroot, County of Cornlent, Duchy of Seitz, Summerforth Empire. Parents have passed away; has one younger sister. Diligent, earnest, and not even remotely picky when it comes to food. Enjoys studying and training. Has an interest in broad-minded women. Bears a strong sense of loyalty toward his lord and master, Ars.

In hindsight, I barely even needed to bother checking Rietz out on that front. I was starting to think it would've been a better idea *not* to bother—I didn't need to know what his taste in women was. On the other hand, to the best of my knowledge, he'd never had any real relationship with a member of the opposite sex.

Maybe I'll introduce him to a broad-minded girl, if I ever happen to come across one...though I guess an Imperial girl would have to be broad-minded to court a Malkan like him.

I'd also learned his birthday, which was noteworthy given that it was the

twenty-fifth day of the fifth month. In other words, his birthday was just five days away! That being said, Rietz didn't know when he'd been born, and we'd always celebrated his birthday on a day we'd picked out arbitrarily. Switching over to his *actual* birthday would've just felt wrong, somehow. I was also a little surprised to learn that he hadn't been born in Missian, and wondered if he was even aware of that himself.

His parents had already passed away...but he had a sister? That was news to me, and the status page's phrasing implied that she might still be alive, too. If it reported on his parents' death, it stood to reason in my mind that it would report on hers as well. The Summerforth Empire was huge, of course, so even if she was alive, the odds of finding her seemed very low, but my sentimental side made me want to do everything I could to reunite them.

Next up, I appraised Charlotte.

LEA: 80/92
VAL: 104/116
INT: 45/45
POL: 37/40

Her stats hadn't improved much, on the whole. She still had plenty of room to grow in the Valor department, though, so I had high hopes she'd step it up eventually. That brought me to the important part: the new, detailed information on her personality. Charlotte's thought processes had always been an enigma in my mind, so I was interested in the results.

Her status page read: Born on the fifth day of the eleventh month, 192 Imperial Era, in Ampare, County of Maasa, Duchy of Missian, Summerforth Empire. Parents have passed away. Has a simple and straightforward

personality. Loves sweets. Enjoys casting magic and sleeping. Has an interest in people who are willing to spoil her. Thinks of her lord and master Ars as her little brother.

I'm sorry, she thinks of me as what?

I couldn't remember a single time that she'd acted like an older sibling for me in any capacity. In fact, I mostly remembered taking care of her. That being said, it was good to know that she wasn't harboring any deep-seated resentment toward me, and I'd already known most of the other stuff my appraisal had told me about her.

Rosell's appraisal came next.

LEA: 65/88
VAL: 22/32
INT: 99/109
POL: 77/95

His stats had risen so much since I'd appraised him a few months earlier, it was like I was looking at a different person. I had to assume that between participating in a war and getting tutored by Mireille, his recent experiences had done him a world of good. His abilities were astonishing considering he was only eleven, and the fact that he still had room to grow was mind-boggling.

As for the extra information on him, it read: Born on the sixth day of the ninth month, 199 Imperial Era, in Torbequista, County of Canarre, Duchy of Missian, Summerforth Empire. Father is alive and well; mother is deceased. Has two brothers. Pathologically pessimistic. Likes vegetable soup and enjoys reading. Has yet to develop an interest in the opposite sex. Considers his lord and master Ars his best friend.

His best friend, huh?

I was just relieved to learn that he didn't think poorly of me. Of course, I hadn't been worried about him, Rietz, or Charlotte to begin with—no, the person I was concerned about was Mireille. I could only begin to guess what went on in her mind behind that poker face of hers, so I went ahead and appraised her. Her stats hadn't changed at all since the last time I checked, which wasn't too much of a surprise considering she'd been close to capped out in everything already. It would take more than a few skirmishes to raise *her* skills.

Finally, my eyes fell upon the important part, her detailed info panel. It read: Born on the fifteenth day of the sixth month, 181 Imperial Era, in Arcantez, County of Arcantez, Duchy of Missian, Summerforth Empire. Parents have passed away. Has one younger brother. Prone to unconventional thinking. Loves alcohol, and drinks all the time. Romantically interested in people younger than her (regardless of gender). Considers her lord and master Ars amusing.

"Amusing"...?

That didn't clear much up at all, and it didn't feel like a sign of uncompromising loyalty, either. Then again, Mireille didn't seem like the type who'd bear loyalty toward *anyone*, and I didn't even need to appraise her to figure that out. It seemed I wouldn't be able to let my guard down around her any time soon.

I also couldn't help but be surprised by her preferences. The "regardless of gender" part made it pretty clear that Mireille was bisexual. Once again, it felt like I'd trampled all over any reasonable standards of privacy, especially considering the part about her being into people younger than her. I'd never

gotten the impression she was looking at *me* in that light, but I knew I'd end up being hyper-vigilant around her from now on.

That wrapped up my appraisal of my inner circle of retainers. As best as I could tell, everyone except for Mireille was more or less trustworthy. I also resolved not to mention my skill's evolution to anyone unless it became necessary. After all, the skill's new info panel had the potential to give me a ton of information that people *definitely* wouldn't want me to have. I'd have to be careful not to let any of those details slip out going forward.

○

The day after our celebration, Couran called a council of war once more. Winter had arrived in Missian, and it was getting colder and colder by the day. I'd heard that this year's winter was supposed to be relatively mild, but we still might see snow toward the end of the sixth month or so. Snow would cause our advance to slow to a crawl, and our goal was to press as far forward as we could manage before the elements delayed our onslaught.

"Now then," said Couran, "the time has come to discuss our assault on Castle Staatz."

Indeed, with Fort Valdsen in our hands, we had the foothold we needed to move on to Castle Staatz, the citadel that guarded a road we'd need to travel to reach Castle Velshdt. Without bringing Staatz under our control, it would be difficult to march our troops on the capital en masse. Although the castle was built on a flat plane, it featured tall ramparts and was built from materials that would stand up to a magical assault quite effectively. Worse still, its magical

defenses were reportedly as solid as they could get.

The castle was, in short, extremely well defended. Storming it by force would be an incredibly hard task, but given our sheer superiority in numbers, it was not an impossible one. We'd also heard all about the commander who was tasked with protecting the castle from Ruper, and according to him, the odds of said commander choosing to turn traitor were low. We'd either have to storm the castle or lay siege to it—no other options presented themselves this time.

“We have a clear path from Fort Valdsen to Castle Staatz, with one exception—here,” said Couran, pointing to a location on the map of Velshdt he'd spread out in front of him. A mark at that position, just a little to the northwest of Castle Staatz, was labeled Castle Rolto. “If we march on Castle Staatz and leave Castle Rolto unaddressed, then there's a chance the forces there will advance on our rear flank after we pass them. Given that the enemy cannot afford to lose Castle Staatz, I expect they'll send reinforcements in from Velshdt proper, and with Rolto's forces behind us, we'll be caught in a pincer attack. We cannot allow that to happen, so Castle Rolto must fall.”

I could see what Couran meant. Castle Rolto was in an inconvenient location. Considering how important Castle Staatz was for Velshdt, I had to imagine that Castle Rolto had been built for the specific purpose of reinforcing it in times of need.

“All that being said,” Couran continued, “if we were to attempt an assault on Castle Rolto before anything else, it stands to reason that reinforcements from Castle Staatz and Velshdt would come to catch us in a pincer attack once again. As such, I have come to the conclusion that our best option is to split our forces into two units and attack both castles simultaneously. What are your thoughts on this proposal?”

I was in no position to argue against the idea. Our overwhelming numerical advantage meant that there were very few demerits to splitting our troops up, so it felt like a solid strategy all around.

“I shall take command of the force that will claim Castle Staatz,” said Couran. “Lumeire, meanwhile, will lead the assault on Castle Rolto.”

“*Me*, Your Lordship?” said Lumeire, his eyes wide with astonishment. Apparently, this was well beyond his expectations.

“Yes, you,” said Couran. “Is there a problem?”

“No, not at all!” said Lumeire. “If such is your will, Lord Couran, I swear I will lead your men to victory!”

If Lumeire would be leading the attack on Castle Rolto, I reasoned, I would be assigned to that division as well. Frankly, though, I was as surprised to see him put in a position of command as he was. There were several other lords in Couran’s force who were ranked higher than him, and seeing him elevated above them seemed like a sign that he’d earned Couran’s trust. Whatever his motivations, though, the decision was set in stone: Lumeire would lead the assault on Castle Rolto.

Our intelligence suggested that Castle Rolto was garrisoned with five thousand men. Couran chose to assign Lumeire ten thousand men to lead in the attack—which was double our enemy’s numbers. Furthermore, while we were in theory leading an assault on the castle, in practice our main objective was to ensure that they couldn’t dispatch reinforcements to Castle Staatz. They wouldn’t be giving up the castle without a fight, but we didn’t *need* them to give up the castle at all. We had to wait for them to try and send reinforcements to Staatz, at which point they’d have to sally forth into a field battle, where we could wipe them out and take the castle largely uncontested.

“That said,” Couran continued, “while I have no doubt you will win the day with such overwhelming numbers, Ruper has informed me that Castle Rolto’s garrison boasts a rather large cavalry contingent for the sake of dispatching troops to the defense of Castle Staatz as quickly as possible. Not only is this division skilled, but you will likely be fighting them on an open field—terrain in which cavalry reigns supreme. A numerical advantage may not be enough to guarantee victory, and I have decided to task the Maitraw Company with supporting your force. Fighting in open fields is their specialty, and I trust they will serve you well.”

The Maitraw Company...

That was a name I’d heard a few times before. They were said to be some of the most skilled and famous mercenaries around, but as far as I’d seen, they hadn’t accomplished anything noteworthy in the war so far. That wasn’t necessarily to their discredit, to be fair—it’s hard to stand out in battle when your army barely fought to begin with.

Come to think of it, I missed my chance to appraise their leader, Clamant, didn’t I?

He wasn’t present at the council, so I’d have to make that happen when I met him later on.

As expected, I was tasked with supporting Lumeire in the attack on Castle Rolto. The plan was met with the approval of Couran’s advisors, and before long, we were making our preparations to split off from the main force. Thankfully, our bloodless victory over Fort Valdsen meant that our troops were all well-rested and ready to sortie. We were ready before I knew it, and it was decided that we’d march on the fort in two days’ time.

“I still can’t believe that I was given command,” Lumeire said to me. “I’m

guessing that you had just as much to do with this as I did, Ars.”

“Me?” I replied. “But how? I thought this was a sign that Lord Couran has faith in *you*!”

“Perhaps, but that’s not the whole of it. You and your people will be playing a vital role in the battle to come. I suspect that Lord Couran would’ve preferred to leave the force in your hands, but couldn’t justify the decision. You are still just a lad, after all. That’s why he chose me—because I serve as your lord, and can therefore act as your proxy.”

“I-I think you’re reading a little too deeply into this,” I countered. I found the theory plausible, in truth, but coming out and saying that would’ve been a bad idea no matter how carefully I phrased it.

“I have to wonder about this Maitraw Company that will aid us in the battle, though,” Lumeire continued. “I don’t make a habit of trusting mercenaries. Lord Couran claims that their skills are unrivaled, but I can’t help having doubts. All I can do is hope they prove their worth, unless...yes, of course! I have an idea, Ars—Have you met with Clamant, the head of the company?”

“I’ve seen him in passing,” I replied.

“And did you appraise him?”

“I’m afraid not,” I admitted. “I intended to, but I missed the chance.”

“No matter—in fact, this works out well,” said Lumeire. “I had already intended to speak with Clamant myself. Will you come along when I do?”

“Gladly.”

Without a moment’s delay, Lumeire sent out one of his men to find Clamant and bring him to us. It only took a few minutes for the messenger to return, though.

“Where’s Clamant? Could you not find him?” asked Lumeire.

“No, I found him,” said the messenger, “but he told me that if someone wishes to speak with him, they’ll have to come to him. I explained that the Count of Canarre himself had summoned him, but he seemed unmoved! I’ve never met a more insolent man.”

“Is that so? Well, I suppose it would only be right for us to go to him, seeing as we’re the ones who wish to talk. One can hardly expect manners from a mercenary,” said Lumeire. Plenty of nobles would end up frothing with rage if they were treated that impolitely, but Lumeire had always struck me as a level-headed person. “Lead us to Clamant, then.”

“V-Very well, Your Lordship!” said the messenger, who proceeded to do just that.

We found Clamant training with a group of soldiers a short ways outside of the fort. I’d caught a glimpse of him once back in Castle Semplar, and he had the exact same aura about him now as he’d had back then. He was not an ordinary person, and you could tell with a single glance. Maybe that was why I remembered his face, even though I’d only caught a glimpse of him before. If Ben had the sort of face you’d forget as soon as you lost sight of him, then Clamant occupied the opposite end of the spectrum: he was a man who left a powerful and lasting impression.

When we arrived, Clamant was sparring with the soldiers. He wasn’t dueling them, though—he was fighting them one on five, deflecting the blades of his foes with ease and grace. His swordsmanship was a sight to behold, and I reached the conclusion that he’d have an S-ranked aptitude associated with it before I even bothered appraising him. We watched him at work for some time before he and the soldiers paused for a break.

“Magnificent,” said Lumeire as he strode up to Clamant. Clamant, however, turned to look at Lumeire without saying a word, his expression as cold and immovable as steel. I had to admit, the man was a little frightening. Lumeire, though, seemed completely unshaken and kept talking. “You live up to your company’s good name. I’ve never seen finer swordsmanship.”

“My swordsmanship is nothing special,” grunted Clamant.

“Surely you jest!” said Lumeire. “After a display like *that*?”

“My areas of expertise are the spear and the bow,” said Clamant. “Especially when I’m on horseback. Fighting on foot isn’t my specialty.”

“If *that* wasn’t a demonstration of your specialties, then I shudder to imagine what your areas of expertise do look like,” replied Lumeire, and frankly, I had to agree. I also couldn’t help but feel a dose of healthy skepticism, so I appraised him.

Clamant Maitraw III

Age: 31

Male

Status:

LEA: 91/95

VAL: 110/112

INT: 65/68

POL: 55/61

Ambition: 50

Aptitudes:

Infantry: A

Cavalry: S

Archer: S

Mage: D

Fortification: C

Weaponry: C

Naval: C

Aerial: A

Strategy: D

Born on the tenth day of the third month, 181 Imperial Era, in Valka, County of Valka, Duchy of Rofeille, Summerforth Empire. Father deceased; mother alive and well. A pragmatic man with a fondness for meat of all varieties. Enjoys training. Has an interest in strong women.

Well, that sure is one hell of a Valor score!

It seemed that his claim to not be much of a swordsman was not a lie after all, on a relative scale. He did have an A-ranked Infantry aptitude, but his S-ranked Cavalry aptitude might very well have made his swordsmanship seem like

nothing special in comparison. Perhaps he just had incredibly high standards.

Though he was skilled, Clamant's supposed pragmatism made me a little worried that he'd choose to retreat the moment the tide of battle started turning against him—though, it occurred to me that most mercenaries would behave that way. In any case, said skills meant that it seemed worthwhile to put our faith in him for the time being.

"Who are you?" asked Clamant.

"I am Lumeire Pyres, Count of Canarre," answered Lumeire. "I have been entrusted with the role of commander over the force bound to attack Castle Rolto, and I have come to meet with the mercenaries who were assigned to support our division."

"Hmph. So the servant from before was yours?" asked Clamant, who seemed unmoved by the knowledge he was speaking with a count.

"That's right."

"And who's the kid?" said Clamant, glancing over at me next.

"My name is Ars Louvent," I replied.

"I don't give a damn what your name is," said Clamant, "but I *do* give a damn about how you look like you're sizing me up. I don't like it. Stop."

Did he somehow sense that I was using my skill on him?



That was new—I'd never seen anyone catch on to the fact that I'd appraised them like that before. I had to assume that either it was a coincidence, or that the man's instincts and senses bordered on the superhuman.

Lumeire chatted with Clamant for a little longer, but eventually, the mercenary brought the conversation to a rather abrupt and unilateral close by returning to his training.

Lumeire turned to me as Clamant left and asked, "So, did you appraise him? Not that I even need to hear the results to know that he's no ordinary man."

"I did, yes," I replied. "Not only is he a brave and valorous man, but he's also a remarkable leader. I have no doubts that he's capable of helping us."

"Is he, now? Then I suppose there remains no room for doubt...except, of course, for the question of his motivation," he added, still sounding a little concerned.

I wasn't as worried as Lumeire seemed to be, personally. Mercenaries earned a living by fighting, which meant that *not* fighting would put their livelihood in jeopardy. That wasn't to say they'd charge headfirst into a disadvantageous conflict, but so long as we held the advantage of numbers, I didn't think we'd have anything to worry about.

Shortly afterward, Lumeire gave the order to prepare to march. Before we started moving out, I found the time to ask Pham to gather information on Castle Rolto for me. I wasn't looking for any detailed insider information this time—I just wanted to know about any conspicuous enemy movements, how many soldiers were stationed there, and his general impression of the castle on the whole. It was more or less just scouting work, so thankfully, his price wasn't steep this time around. That would give me all the info I'd need about the

castle, which I hoped would help me cope with any unexpected developments.

Finally, the day of our march arrived.

“The conquest of Castle Rolto will prove instrumental for Lord Couran’s campaign,” declared Lumeire as he addressed his troops. “We shall emerge victorious—defeat is not an option! Our army outnumbers the enemy two to one, and we stand at a great advantage, but do not allow these favorable conditions to lull you into a sense of complacency! We fight with our all! Now, march!”

With that, the army began its trek toward Castle Rolto.

○

Meanwhile in Castle Rolto, the lord of the fortress had called an extended conference with his most trusted advisors to address their perilous circumstances.

“I must admit...I failed to anticipate Lord Ruper’s betrayal,” muttered the lord, a man named Jean Tendory. At the age of twenty-two, he was rather young for his position. He had long, blonde hair and handsome features that didn’t suit the look of resignation on his face.

Jean had been acquainted with Ruper, and knew him as an earnest, faithful man, but that impression had been shattered by his unexpected act of treachery. In truth, it had never been an accurate impression at all. Deep down, Ruper had always harbored an ambition to advance in station—Jean had simply failed to see through to his real motivations. He wasn’t alone, either. Kanes, the man who had assigned Ruper to watch over Fort Valdsen, had been taken in

by his persona as well. Ruper had spent his whole life hiding his ambitions, and that had finally paid off for the man.

“I bring news, Your Lordship,” said a messenger who had just arrived on the scene. “The enemy’s army has split into two divisions! One marches upon Castle Staatz, while the other appears to be making its way here!”

“As expected,” Jean sighed. “How many men are headed our way?”

“Over ten thousand,” said the messenger. “We’ve also received reports that the Maitraw Company marches among their ranks.”

“So ten thousand men wasn’t enough for them? They just *had* to hire the most dangerous mercenaries around as well?” Jean groaned. His own garrison numbered some five thousand troops. If the enemy’s soldiers were poorly trained, then Jean felt confident in his ability to prevail against superior numbers, but the Maitraw Company was renowned for the ruthless competence of its members. Their presence on the battlefield lowered Jean’s odds of turning the situation around.

“It doesn’t matter how many of them there are!” shouted one of Jean’s advisors. “We must sortie at once and ride to Castle Staatz’s aid! We await your command, Lord Jean!”

“Well said!” spoke up another. “Our cavalry is unrivaled! No enemy line is too sturdy for us to break through!”

Castle Rolto was renowned for its cavalry unit, and a great number of skilled horsemen had gathered to serve as part of it. So great was their confidence in their skills that even hearing they were outnumbered two to one wasn’t enough to make any of them falter. Jean himself was well known for his capable horsemanship, and had led the cavalry unit into battle on many occasions to

great success.

“Wait,” said Jean, holding out a hand to calm down his impassioned advisors. “Don’t get ahead of yourselves. Our cavalry is unrivaled, true, but the enemy’s forces are nothing to scoff at. If we take on numbers like theirs without a plan, our effort will be doomed from the outset.”

“You mean to say we should think up a strategy?” asked one of them.

“Exactly. Or rather, I’ve already begun putting one into practice.”

“You have?”

“Indeed. Though whether or not it bears fruit, of course, is still to be determined.”

“News, Your Lordship!” shouted yet another messenger as he burst into the room. “I come bearing a missive from Lord Handar!”

“It finally arrived?!” shouted Jean as he received the letter, tearing it open to read on the spot. A grin then spread across his face.

“We might just win this battle after all,” Jean muttered, then leaped to his feet and shouted out an order to his men. “Prepare to sortie at once!”

○

Partway through the march to Castle Rolto, we paused to set up camp and bed down for the night. As we ate dinner that evening, I noticed that Charlotte was scowling at her food.

“This is tasteless,” she muttered despondently.

Frankly, I was with her on that one. The trail rations we'd been provided to eat while we were on the move hadn't been cooked with palatability in mind. We had rock-hard bread, watery soup, and other less than satisfying provisions available. That being said, this wasn't anything new. We'd been eating like this for a very long time now, and I had no idea why Charlotte would be complaining about it all of a sudden.

"We've been eating this food for weeks," said Rietz, who must have felt the same way I did. "Why complain about it *now*?"

"Just 'cause I haven't been complaining doesn't mean it hasn't been *disgusting*! I've hated this godawful slop this whole time, and I can't take it anymore!" Charlotte shouted. "Doesn't this bother you, Rietz?! When was the last time we had *good* food?!"

"I'm used to it," said Rietz with a shrug. "I'm surprised you aren't, considering the environment you grew up in."

"I couldn't eat decent food back then, sure, but the moment you have your first good meal, you can never go back! You're with me, right, Lord Ars?!" said Charlotte, passing the buck to me.

I hadn't changed my mind in the past minute, and I did more or less agree with her in spirit, but I still couldn't let myself take her side.

"You can't expect good food on the battlefield," I said. "You'll just have to put up with it."

"A-Aren't I supposed to be *older* than you?! Why do you have to sound so *mature*?!" gasped Charlotte. Of course, if you counted my previous life, I was considerably older than her in a mental sense.

"I dunno, I think I get where she's coming from," said Mireille. "Y'know what

makes it easier to deal with, though? Just keep thinking about how good your first real meal's gonna taste when the fighting's finally over. Lemme tell you, there's nothing like your first bite of real food after weeks of war rations."

"I never thought about it that way. Let's wrap this war up as soon as possible," replied Charlotte with an approving nod. It didn't feel like the best possible way to drive her into battle, but I was glad to see her feeling motivated nevertheless.

"Oh, and this stuff helps too. Couple swigs of this, and you won't even care how bad the food is!" Mireille added, suddenly pulling out a bottle she must've tucked somewhere in her shirt. I could only assume that "this" meant "a stiff drink."

"Ah!" shouted Rosell the second he caught sight of the bottle. "You know you're not supposed to be drinking, Master!"

"Oh, come on—why not?" grumbled Mireille.

"All sorts of reasons! It'd be bad enough if the soldiers on the front lines were drunk, but *you* need to be clearheaded to do your work! How are you supposed to strategize when you're too busy tripping over your own two feet?!"

"It's just a little sip, kid! Y'know, a swig or two makes it easier to think clearly."

"No it doesn't! That's not how alcohol works!"

Rosell lunged forward to snatch the bottle out of Mireille's hand, but she pulled it back and held it over her head. Considering the difference between their heights, that was checkmate. Rosell was left jumping ineffectually, trying and failing to reach the bottle.

"Ha ha ha! Try again when you've grown a head or two taller!" Mireille

cackled, then tried to take a drink...only for Rietz, who was almost as tall as her and also standing right behind her, to snag the bottle right out of her hand.

“I’m confiscating this.”

“Wh-What?! Dammit, Rietz, give that back!” shouted Mireille, but Rietz was too fast for her. It took a few minutes of keep away, but eventually, she resigned herself to her fate and gave up on retrieving her booze.

“Son of...a bitch,” she muttered between panting, heaving gasps. “I swear...I’ll get you for this...”

With that, Mireille collapsed to the ground. I found myself wondering: was it a good idea to give a woman like her command over an army?

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The next day, we resumed our advance on Castle Rolto.

“Hey, kiddo! Looks like we’ve got a report from the Shadows,” said Mireille as we marched. She was using a specially designed catalyzer to keep in touch with them by way of the Transmit spell.

Transmit’s range wasn’t unlimited, but the Shadows had quite a few agents on the job, and had a relay system set up to deliver reports at great speeds over vast distances. This time, they’d sent a message to inform us that a force of around five thousand soldiers—exactly the number we’d anticipated—had sortied from Castle Rolto about a half hour earlier. Transmit was only capable of translating simple, basic noises, by the way, but those who knew the appropriate codes could still send and receive coherent messages. Mireille was very proficient with that system, so I’d entrusted her with the duty of receiving

all our messages.

I immediately went to report what I'd learned to Lumeire.

"Just as expected, then," he said when I was finished.

"It seems that way, yes," I replied.

"If the enemy's on the move, we should set up our formation here and block the road," said Mireille.

"Why do you say that?" asked Lumeire.

"The enemy force is mostly comprised of cavalry, and they'll be in a hurry to back up Staatz. If they don't take the Pran Highroad, they'll never make it in time, so there's almost no chance they *won't* pass through here. If they don't, that means they'll be traveling off-road, and they'll lose the advantage their cavalry would give them, so we can just chase after them and wipe them out."

It seemed like a solid plan to me. Since our objective was to prevent enemy reinforcements from reaching Staatz, shutting down the road made total sense. Lumeire agreed, and we began setting up our battle formation without delay. The enemy would likely arrive within a day or so, so we decided to pick a nearby location to serve as our battleground.

The place we ended up choosing wasn't perfect terrain for our purposes, but getting our ranks sorted and ready was the higher priority. We constructed a makeshift palisade to stand in front of our troops and help break the brunt of the enemy's charge. We'd been carrying a stock of wood with us, so we were at no lack of materials and the work went quickly. With that, all we had left to do was wait for the enemy to arrive.

We may have had twice the number of troops as our enemy, but their fighting force was not to be underestimated. Nothing left an army shaken like a head-on

cavalry charge, and if our troops were thrown into a state of disorder, it wasn't unthinkable that we could lose. I knew very well that my life was on the line, so I resolved to stay calm and be ready for any possibility as I watched the battle unfold.

As we waited for the enemy force to arrive, Mireille received another report through her catalyzer. I assumed that our spies were reporting in to say that the enemy was close, but as it turned out, I couldn't have been farther from the truth.

"Oh...?" said Mireille with a smirk. "Well, *that* sure makes this more interesting."

I didn't know how to decode a Transmit spell, so I had no idea what she was talking about.

"What did they say?" I asked, already worried. What was interesting to Mireille tended to be concerning by my standards—her worldview was incomprehensible to me.

"Y'know how we were assuming that the enemy army would head straight here? Well, they didn't," said Mireille. "They took an unexpected route. Our spies tailed them to a place called the Daldoll Moor, where they rendezvoused with another army. *Now* they're heading our way."

I blinked.

"What?"

"Boiling it down to the important part: they got reinforcements," said Mireille.

"*Reinforcements?*" I repeated incredulously. "From *where?*"

"Judging by the flag they're flying, it's the army of House Serdoura. Their

head's the current Count of Balton."

The County of Balton, I recalled, was located in the northeastern reaches of Velshdt, close enough to send reinforcements to Castle Rolto in a pinch. The factor that made this a shock, though, was that I'd heard the Count of Balton had claimed neutrality in the conflict between Couran and Vasmarque. We'd been acting under the assumption that they weren't an active threat, but it seemed that choice was coming back to bite us.

"How many of them are there?" I asked. In the best-case scenario, only a few of the barons in Balton had decided to side with Vasmarque and sent troops. That would mean several hundred troops—a thousand at most—and wouldn't put our plans in jeopardy.

"Five thousand minimum, from the sound of it," said Mireille.

"Oh. Well."

That meant we were facing the *worst*-case scenario: in just a brief period of time, the entirety of the County of Balton had thrown its lot in with Vasmarque. This development was beyond our wildest expectations. The enemy's force was now equally matched with or superior to ours in terms of numbers. I dashed off to report the news to Lumeire, and he was shaken enough to call together an emergency council on the spot.

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"This is an unprecedented crisis," said Lumeire. He and all the nobles in his force had gathered up in a tent at the center of our formation for an emergency council of war. I was attending with all my retainers, of course. "The enemy has

joined up with reinforcements, and their force now rivals ours in number. As matters stand, our victory is far from assured. What shall we do? Request aid from Lord Couran?”

“Reinforcements? I’m not sure,” said Rosell. “I doubt they’d make it here in time. I don’t know how far Lord Couran’s force has advanced at the moment, but the enemy will be here before we know it. Considering the time it will take to send the message, plus the time required for reinforcements to get here, I can’t imagine they’ll make it before it’s too late.”

“I see,” said Lumeire. “Then what if we were to request reinforcements, leave a rearguard to delay the enemy’s advance, and retreat until we converge with Lord Couran’s troops and go on the offensive once more?”

“We may be able to bolster our numbers in time with that plan, yes,” Rosell said, though he still sounded apprehensive.

“I have no idea what you people are so concerned about,” said Clamant, who was participating in the discussion as well. “The enemy has as many troops as we do? Then each of our men just has to kill one of theirs. It’s simple.”

“If only things were so simple,” sighed Lumeire. “However, our enemy’s troops are notoriously skilled, and their morale is high. Our men, on the other hand, have been anticipating an effortless rout, not a fight on even terms. I fear their morale will be low due to the sudden shift.”

“They may be skilled, but not more skilled than we are. We will not lose,” said Clamant. “Or do you doubt our ability?”

“No, no, I’m well aware of the Maitraw Company’s strength. Nevertheless...” Lumeire trailed off. Reading between the lines, I presumed that he was concerned he couldn’t trust the mercenaries. There was no telling whether

they'd choose to withdraw on account of the even numbers, especially if the tide of battle started turning against us.

"Let it be known that we will earn every coin that has crossed our palms. That is our way of life, and Couran Salemakhia has granted us a substantial down payment for our services. We will not withdraw until we have worked off that balance," said Clamant. I assumed he'd guessed what Lumeire was worried about.

"I'm against falling back too," said Mireille. "They have as many men as us, not more—it's not like we're fighting at a disadvantage. We might as well take a swing at them before we talk about running away."

"But Master," said Rosell, "we're dealing with a force centered around a cavalry division! If we try to withdraw after engaging with them, it's possible that they'll break through our rearguard, catch up with the main force, and wipe us out. Then they'll be able to catch Lord Couran's force unaware and pin them between their army and the army from Staatz."

"Fair point," said Mireille. "But falling back and asking Couran to send us troops would be a problem for his front, too. There's no point in stopping the troops from Balton if Couran can't handle Castle Staatz in the meantime. Don't lose sight of our ultimate objective."

"That's true," said Rosell. "But if worst comes to worst and the main force is caught in a pincer attack, the casualties could prove insurmountable. Our offensive could end then and there, and building our forces back up would take time we don't have—and that's not even considering the possibility that Lord Couran himself could be taken captive. A loss is a loss, yes, but not all failures are equal in terms of consequences... But then again, making our stand here and winning is the best possible outcome by far... What *are* our chances...?"

He was mostly talking to himself, at that point, and drifted off into furious thought. I could tell that he had ideas, but also that we were in a very difficult position.

“I believe we should engage the enemy as planned,” said Rietz. “There’s no sense in fighting an unwinnable battle, but the outcome of this engagement is far from set in stone. The enemy’s morale may be high, but in their elation at doubling the size of their force, they may disregard the need for caution and advance upon us recklessly. I believe that is a state of affairs that we can take advantage of.”

“Perhaps... What of you, Ars? What are your thoughts on this predicament?” asked Lumeire, turning to me next.

If I were being honest, I would’ve liked nothing better than to turn tail and flee on the spot. Going up against an army five thousand strong was scary enough, and the thought of taking on *ten* thousand men was downright terrifying. I knew that was just my emotional response getting the better of me, though, and that a withdrawal was not the right choice on a tactical level.

I hadn’t had the chance to appraise the enemy leader, so I couldn’t be sure we held an advantage in terms of personnel, but at the very least I knew that some of our people were hard to beat. The odds of them having retainers more capable than ours seemed low, and it did seem likely that they would be in a hurry, which would open up opportunities to turn the tide, even if our troops were left dispirited by the surprise reinforcements. Plus, running away without putting up a fight wouldn’t endear us to Couran! When I looked at the situation in totality, standing and fighting felt like the best path forward.

“I believe we should engage the enemy as planned,” I said.

“I see,” Lumeire replied with a nod, then asked the rest of the nobles in

attendance for their opinions. In the end, the majority sided with me and Rietz.

“Very well, then,” said Lumeire once he’d finished his consultation. “We will make our stand here! Prepare to engage the enemy, on the double!”

Just then, a noise rang out from Mireille’s catalyzer—the sound generated by a Transmit spell.

“Ah. That’ll be a report from the Shadows.”

Her catalyzer kept emitting noises for longer than I was used to. It went on long enough that I started to worry if she’d even be able to decode the message, but thankfully, those concerns turned out to be groundless.

“New info about the enemy army,” Mireille reported. “They’re moving fast, and should be here in about ten hours or so. They’re in a hurry, that’s for sure, and it sounds like their morale’s running high.”

“Then they must be rushing to reinforce Castle Staatz, as expected,” I commented. It seemed like an obvious decision to make, on their part. If they took their time, then the fortress could fall before they even arrived. Setting traps seemed like the best way to turn the odds in our favor, but as to what sort of traps we’d use, I was at a loss. Magical traps weren’t very easy to lay—we’d need around three days or so to get them all set up, so they were out of the question in this scenario.

“I think I’ve come up with our best possible option,” said Rosell, breaking his long silence as his pondering came to an end.

“You have a plan?” asked Lumeire.

“I do,” said Rosell with a nod. “I’ve thought up a way we can bait the enemy into a situation more favorable to us. First off, you’re aware of the forest behind our current position, yes?”

“Of course,” confirmed Lumeire. The road we’d traveled had wound its way through the forest, and we were set up just a short ways away from its outskirts. We’d considered intercepting the enemy reinforcements within the forest, at first, but back then we’d still thought we had the advantage of numbers and had decided that fighting in an open field would give us the best chance of leveraging that advantage.

“We’ll conceal our troops within the forest,” said Rosell. “Then we’ll bait them in toward our position, and rain arrows and magic down upon them when they enter our range. Cavalry are vulnerable to ambush tactics, especially from long range. I’m certain a sneak attack will throw their ranks into chaos, and our infantry will be hiding as well, ready to catch our foes in a pincer attack and decimate them while they’re off guard!”

Luring them into an ambush, huh?

Considering the hurry our foes were in, it felt plausible.

“Yeah, I don’t think so,” said Mireille. “They may be rushing ahead and throwing caution to the wind, but they’ll at least be sending out scouts ahead of their main force. They won’t be *completely* oblivious to what we’re up to, so they’ll catch on for sure if all we do is hide and hope for the best.”

“What if we put on an act, then?” said Rosell. “We can make a big show of some of our troops fleeing, *then* take up position past the treeline. If we can manage to trick them and make them think that our chain of command has broken down, they’ll be more likely to assume they have the upper hand and fall into our trap.”

“An act, you say? Perhaps...but our force is far from a small one,” pointed out Rietz. “Communicating the plan to all of our men in secret and ensuring they feign retreat well enough to convince our foes would be a challenge, and has

the potential to damage our troops' morale to boot."

"I *was* a little worried about that part," admitted Rosell.

"Meh, morale'll work itself out. I know a trick or two that'll help us there," said Mireille. She seemed confident that she could raise our force's spirits if the need arose. Considering her history of leading troops into battle, I assumed her confidence was well founded.

"Who should play the part of our retreating force, then?" I asked.

"Having the Maitraw Company play that role will be our most convincing option," said Rosell. "It wouldn't be at all strange for negotiations with our mercenaries to break down prior to the battle, causing them to retreat. The benefits to using them are twofold, as well—I'm sure our enemies are wary of them, given their reputation, and if they think we won't have them on our side, they may lower their guards."

"I could see the Maitraws pulling off a surprise attack—but I could also see them deciding to turn tail and make a break for it," said Mireille, paying no regard whatsoever to the fact that Clamant himself was in attendance.

"I have no objections to this plan," Clamant said in response. "If you tell me to do it, I'll get it done."

"I wonder about that," said Mireille. "What do you think, kiddo?"

I didn't see any reason to distrust him, myself. My Appraisal skill didn't give me the power to see through to his innermost thoughts, even after its evolution, but from what I knew of the man, he just didn't have a good motive to withdraw. It'd be one thing if he were morally opposed to surprise attacks, but he seemed like the sort of man who would win by any means necessary, no matter how much he dirtied his hands in the process. He *was* supposed to be

pragmatic, after all.

“I believe that Clamant is worthy of our trust,” I replied.

“Then I’ll sign off on this plan,” said Mireille. “Whether or not it works will all come down to whether our commanding officers can pull it off, though.”

We had a plan, then—but of course, the final decision on whether or not to follow through with it was Lumeire’s to make. He spent quite some time weighing his options, but ultimately, he chose to take up our strategy and send Clamant and his men on a feigned retreat. I just had to hope that our enemies would be taken in by the act...

A number of hours later, the enemy force was drawing close to our position. As for our own troops, they were more than a little shaken up by the Maitraw Company’s apparent last-second departure. If we were going to raise their morale before the battle, now was the time.

“Listen well, my men!” bellowed Lumeire. “The Maitraw Company has withdrawn, but we have received a report that reinforcements from Lord Couran’s main force are inbound! They will arrive within a matter of hours, and even lacking the Maitraw Company’s support, we will have the means to emerge victorious!”

Needless to say, no such reinforcements were on their way. Mireille was the one who’d come up with that aspect of the plan. I had a feeling that the brighter soldiers might’ve been able to figure out that they were being fed lies, but I also had it on good authority that most of our men weren’t especially bright and would fall for the story hook, line, and sinker. The idea was that even if the supposed loss of troops damaged their morale, the knowledge that more

men would be coming to replenish our numbers would raise it right back up again. As expected, the moment Lumeire made his announcement, I could see his soldiers' expressions brighten. Their worries were wiped away in the blink of an eye.

Finally, the enemy force was close enough for us to see on the horizon. The time for battle had arrived, but they didn't charge toward our encampment right away. Instead, they came to a halt a fair distance away. Clearly, they weren't planning on charging in without taking the time to assess the situation first. They were close enough to see, but that was on account of the flat, wide open nature of the terrain—they were still well out of the range of our archers.

"They're keeping their distance, huh..." I muttered.

"Perhaps they suspect we're up to something?" suggested Rietz.

There was a possibility that the enemy had managed to learn we were expecting reinforcements, but even if they had, they'd also know that said reinforcements were supposed to be a fair distance away. It didn't seem like a good enough reason for them to display this sort of caution.

After an extended period of observation, the enemy army began to march. A regiment of men mounted upon enormous horses charged toward us, raising a ferocious battle cry and leading a massive crowd of infantrymen in their wake. Seeing their charge begin, Lumeire gave our troops the order to prepare to stop them in their tracks.

I shivered as I watched the cavalrymen plow toward us. I'd seen cavalry in action during our military drills a number of times, but this was my first time witnessing *this* many of them in action all at once. I could feel the ground tremble with the thuds of countless hoof falls, the sensation intense enough that for a second, I thought it might be an earthquake. If our frontline soldiers

gave in to fear and broke formation, our whole army would be thrown into chaos.

Eventually, the enemy cavalry entered our archers' effective range. Our archers let loose a volley of arrows, which rained down into their ranks like rain. It was then that their cavalry's skill became most apparent: they swatted some arrows out of the air, dodged others, and emerged almost unscathed.

Our mages, meanwhile, were handicapped by the fact that we hadn't brought a large catalyzer along with us. Those were considered siege weapons, and weren't employed in field battles. The same was true of explosion-aspected aqua magia, of which our supply was limited. The only forms of magic available to us at the moment were fire and sound, and fire was the only one of those two with any offensive potential.

Given those limitations, our mage regiment resorted to shooting off volleys of synchronized fire magic using small and mid-sized catalyzers. If we were dealing with poorly-trained, unprepared cavalry, that might have been enough to break their charge, but unfortunately for us, our foes were very ready for our attack.

Among the enemy's host were horse-mounted mages, capable of casting even at a full gallop. Those mages cast protective spells that shielded their entire regiment from our mages' rain of fire. Magic was something only those with talent could use to begin with, and casting on horseback took incredible skill, but the difficulties involved in training a horseback mage were outweighed by the benefits they brought to a cavalry regiment in an era where magic dominated the battlefield.

"Defensive magic? Who *cares*?" Charlotte muttered, then held her mid-sized catalyzer aloft and began to chant, reciting the incantation for Blaze: a powerful fire spell. Charlotte had the power to turn Fire Bullet, the lowest-level fire spell

out there, into an earth-shaking explosion. In her hands, a mid-level spell like Blaze was capable of outputting a terrifying amount of firepower, and sure enough, her fireball shattered the enemy's magical barrier and slammed into their ranks, blowing away scores of horsemen in an instant.

"All right!" Charlotte exclaimed.

"We can always count on your magic," I commented. For a moment I thought that her spell might've halted the enemy's charge, but unfortunately, we had no such luck.

"Don't you *dare* break formation, you craven whoresons! Anyone who turns tail here will die by *my* blade when the battle's over!" bellowed an enormous man at the head of the enemy's ranks. His cry was so loud that I assumed he'd cast Hyper Voice at first, but then I realized that he was carrying a long halberd rather than a catalyzer. His voice was just naturally that loud. I could tell in an instant that he was a remarkable individual.

Rietz, who was close at hand on horseback, nocked an arrow to his bowstring and took aim at the massive man. Rietz was good at just about everything, and archery was no exception—his aptitude in the field was A-ranked. He had the precision and skill to calculate a trajectory that would send his arrow into the man's forehead, but the man swatted the arrow out of the air before it met its mark. Rietz loosed several more arrows, each as accurate as the first, but to no avail.

"He's a tough one," Rietz muttered. I had to assume that the man had a very high Valor score, though he was too far away for me to appraise him and get any specific numbers.

The enemy's cavalry was all but upon our outermost ranks. Their mages cast fire magic to obliterate the palisades that we'd set up to bear the brunt of their

charge, but our own mages wielded defensive magic to intercept the attacks. A few segments of the palisade still caught fire, and the horsemen took advantage of those gaps to slip through.

Our spearmen were ready to intercept them on the other side, but they proved incapable of stopping all of our foes in their tracks. Too many of them breaking through would spell doom for our formation, so we ordered troops to move in and support the weakened areas. The enemy's charge had done its job, though, and the situation in the front lines was deteriorating.

"Hmm—they're better than I thought. We might've lost if this were a fair fight," Mireille casually commented.

"Is this *really* the time?!" I snapped. "We *still* might lose if our plan doesn't work out!"

"Oh, no need to worry about that," said Mireille. "In a sense, being at a disadvantage works in our favor. The enemy won't suspect a thing if we withdraw now, and we can lure them right into our trap. Of course, it wouldn't do for our ranks to completely collapse, so I suppose we'll have to take action before it comes to that."

Mireille and Rosell rushed off to speak with Lumeire, and soon after, the order was given for our army to begin a retreat. We'd be fighting a defensive battle as we fell back toward the forest. Fighting as you retreated was a difficult prospect to begin with, of course, and the enemy's core unit being made up of cavalry made the move all the more challenging. We'd be fighting an uphill battle.

"Fall back! Fall back!" Lumeire shouted as our troops began to move. If we wanted our retreat to proceed smoothly, it was essential for someone to act as our rearguard. They would be responsible for retreating and holding off the

enemy at the same time. The moment the order to retreat was given, a unit that had been assigned to the role in advance leaped into action. Their commanding officer directed the unit—which was made up of spearmen—to intercept the enemy cavalry and keep them from harrying the rest of us as we fled.

The task did not prove to be an easy one. The horsemen were fast, which made their advance difficult to stop. It was very possible that one or more of them could slip through our rearguard's line at any given moment. Worse still, our enemies had come prepared for such a scenario and were capable of steering their horses through the slightest of gaps.

That was where our mages entered the picture. Blowing our foes away with direct attacks wasn't all they were good for—they could also use sound magic to frighten their mounts, or form walls of flame to block off routes of attack. The soldiers were smart enough to know that magical fire walls weren't all that dangerous if you just barreled through them, but horses were another matter. They would be too scared to get anywhere near the barriers, which meant they could serve as an effective deterrent. Those magical defenses gave our spearmen the time they needed to come running and drive the cavalry away from our main force once more.

Our enemy, however, really was well-trained. Not even magic was enough to keep them scared away for long, and it was inevitable that some of them would manage to make their way through our rearguard's defenses. In those cases, it was necessary for some of our fleeing soldiers to split off and back the rearguard up. We had to keep a careful balance maintained between our front and rear units—if we sent too many soldiers to guard the rear, then we risked being unable to break through if the enemy sent soldiers around to cut us off within the forest. Being surrounded and pinned was the worst-case scenario, so

we had to use as few troops as possible to hold them back.

Thankfully, our initial rearguard seemed to be doing a very good job. Only a few horsemen slipped through, so we had to send a minimum amount of troops back to mop them up. The bulk of our force was still concentrated in the front of our formation, leaving very little reason to worry we might be cut off.

“Just a little longer and we’ll make it to the forest,” I muttered. It seemed that, in spite of everything, we were close to pulling our plan off.

If the rearguard had failed and the enemy cavalry had charged into our back line, we would’ve been routed for sure. I could only imagine what would’ve become of me—I wasn’t even sure if I would’ve made it out alive. I was mounted on a horse, just in case, but I wasn’t much of a rider and doubted that I could’ve outran trained horsemen. I felt more than a little relieved as we broke through the treeline and advanced into the forest, still far ahead of the enemy.

“Thank goodness,” I sighed. “It looks like we’ll live to see tomorrow after all.”

“Even if they had caught up with us, I would never allow you to die here, Lord Ars,” said Rietz. Coming from him, it sounded convincing.

“We’ve made it to the forest, yes—but the question now is whether the enemy will follow us,” said Lumeire.

“Looking at it from their perspective, we just turned tail and ran like a bunch of sniveling cowards,” said Mireille. “They’ve got nothing to lose and plenty to gain by pursuing us, as far as they know. That is, unless their leader’s got good instincts...but I didn’t exactly get the impression that the guy leading their charge was the sort who could see a trap like this coming.”

I hadn’t had the chance to appraise him, but still, I had to agree with her assessment. I then realized it would be worth going out of my way to appraise

the enemy's leadership in the future, even if it took a bit of risk to pull it off. That would give me a much more informed perspective from which to make this sort of call.

"Ah, there we go," said Mireille as a message came in through her catalyzer. "The enemy's advancing into the forest after us. Looks like they have no idea they're playing right into our hands, too. They're not being very careful about it at all."

It seemed, then, that our plan had gone off without a hitch. There was just one factor that still had me worried: even after entering the forest, we'd still seen no sign of the Maitraw Company. I was starting to get concerned that they might not be here at all. It was either that, or they were *incredibly* good at hiding themselves. I glanced around, trying to catch at least a glimpse of one of their men.

"Don't worry. They're keeping in touch and standing by," said Mireille, who must've noticed my restless behavior. "And even if they hadn't told me, I could tell they're out there. They're hiding pretty damn well, but not well enough to fool me. Still, it's a pretty impressive job, considering how many of them there are. Looks like the Maitraw Company has earned its reputation—they're as good at ambushes as they are in a fair fight."

In spite of my anxiety, I decided to take her word for it as we advanced deeper into the woods. We marched onward until it felt like we were somewhere near the heart of the forest, at which point Lumeire ordered our troops to come to a halt. The men, of course, were distressed by the command. They were under the impression that the battle was lost and we were fleeing for our lives, but now they were supposed to form back up and confront the enemy all over again?

The time, then, had come to share the true plan with our force and explain that the mercenaries who had supposedly fled were, in fact, waiting in ambush all around us. The enemy was closing in fast enough that there was no longer any danger of our men ruining the operation with their lousy acting, and we could open up about our actual objectives. Thankfully, that calmed them down and it wasn't long before we'd reconstructed our battle formation.

We moved our archers and mages into the cover of the surrounding foliage, where they joined forces with the Maitraw Company's men. Our plan was to launch an all-out assault from the enemy's flanks the moment the company reported that all of the enemy cavalry had entered the woods. There was very little doubt left that their cavalry made up the bulk of their forces, and if we could catch their entire advance unit in a trap and wipe them out, the remaining soldiers would have no chance of defeating us. The only option I could imagine being left for them at that point would be to withdraw and return to their castle, which would mean we'd accomplished our objective.

Before long, the cavalry unit was upon us.

"Given up on running away, have you?!" shouted the massive man at the head of their formation, a confident and perhaps slightly complacent grin plastered across his face.

The man hadn't the foggiest idea he was walking right into a trap. I appraised him, and found that his name was Dan Allest. He had an 82 in Leadership and a 99 in Valor, but all of his other stats were quite low. His S-rank in Cavalry was quite something, at least. It felt like a waste to let someone with a Valor score like his perish, but I also knew that bringing him down would help turn the tide of battle in our favor, considering what it would do to his men's morale.

"Or perhaps you think you can still turn this battle around? Ha ha ha! *Fools!*"

These woods will be your graveyard!” Dan continued. His attempt at blustery intimidation was pretty played out, I had to say, but thankfully, I didn’t have to listen to any more of it on account of the Maitraw Company choosing that precise moment to launch their attack. A flurry of arrows and spells shot through the trees, peppering the enemy ranks.

“What?!” cried out Dan.

“It’s an ambush!” shouted one of his men.

The Maitraw Company couldn’t have picked a better time to spring their trap. With archers and mages on both flanks, there was very little our foes could do to defend themselves. Not even their previously formidable magical barriers could save them—those, after all, took time to cast, making them impossible to bring out at a moment’s notice. Worse still, the Maitraw Company seemed to have a large number of skilled archers in their employ, and the arrows raining down upon the enemy flew with incredible accuracy. There was nothing they could do, and scores of cavalry fell in what felt like the blink of an eye.

“The enemy’s behind us, Commander!” shouted one of Dan’s remaining men.

“What?! How?!” Dan roared. It had taken them far too long to notice our movements, and now they were surrounded. The complacent grin that had shown he was confident in his victory was nowhere to be found—now, Dan looked downright frantic. That spell of panic didn’t last, though, and a moment later, he forced himself to calm down again.

“We’ve walked into a trap, and have enemies on all sides, but this battle’s not over yet! Their front line is weak—charge through them, find their leader, take his head, and we’ll win the day yet! Grit your teeth and follow my lead!” Dan bellowed as he spurred his horse forward, galloping toward our position. His men could hardly let their leader charge forth on his own, so they followed in

his wake.

“For all their strengths, cavalry also don’t have many options at a time like this,” said Mireille. “That’s the face of a man who knows this is do-or-die.”

“In short, we can’t let our guards down,” added Rietz.

Their read on the situation seemed right on the money. With their backs against the wall, Dan’s troops had chosen to make their last stand and fight like madmen, staking their lives in an attempt to break through and kill Lumeire. The fact that they were still listening to their commanding officer and still maintaining their formation and morale, even as they were under attack from all sides, was yet another sign of just how well-trained these men were.

While the initial volley had caught them off guard, they were now aware that they were under attack and began raising their magical defenses. Between that and the fact that each and every one of them was a skilled fighter, our own troops found themselves rapidly overwhelmed. Their leader Dan, in particular, was running amok through the battlefield, cleaving several men with each swing of his massive halberd.

Dan’s rampage did not escape Rietz’s notice.

“I’ll handle the leader,” he said, spurring his horse forward.

My first instinct was to let him go. Dan was dealing incredible damage to our formation, and bringing him down would deal a massive blow to the enemy’s morale. However, I couldn’t help but harbor a nagging doubt that someone as strong as him could beat Rietz. And Rietz was one man who I absolutely could not allow to die on me, under any circumstances.

I have to stop him!

“Wait!” I shouted.

“But, Your Lordship,” Rietz began to protest.

“I say you let him take his shot,” said Mireille before Rietz could articulate himself. “We need to take that guy down one way or another, unless we wanna risk this whole plan falling to pieces. People like him have a way of forcing their way out of traps like this, no matter how absurd the odds against them are. A girl like me doesn’t stand a chance against a monster like him, and that means if anyone’s going to do the deed, it’ll have to be Rietz.”

“I see your point,” I began, “but—”

“A proper lord has faith in his retainers. You know that, don’t you?”

Mireille’s words struck a chord with me. I was trying to prioritize my people’s safety in the moment, and neglecting to consider whether that would be in their best interests in the long run. And besides, I was far from convinced that Rietz would lose. I took a deep breath, then turned to him.

“Can you beat him, Rietz?” I asked.

“I can,” said Rietz without hesitation. He’d witnessed Dan’s ferocious might, but he didn’t show so much as a hint of fear. He was confident that he would emerge victorious.

“All right,” I said. “Then do it. Engage the enemy’s leader, and bring him down!”

“Yes, Your Lordship!” Rietz replied as he sped off, making a beeline toward Dan.

At Ars's command, Rietz galloped through the woods, spurring his horse forward toward Dan with a halberd held at the ready. Rietz favored polearms over a sword or a bow when he engaged in mounted combat, and the halberd was his weapon of choice. Soon, his skillful horsemanship brought him up to a short distance away from Dan.

Dan, meanwhile, was battling away on the frontlines, scattering his foes with each wide, cleaving swing of his halberd.

"Flee, peons! Flee! My business is with your leader! Clear a path to his head, and you might get to keep yours!" he bellowed. Hardened and well-trained though the soldiers on the frontlines were, the sheer force of Dan's might and presence sent the bulk of them scattering in fear.

Rietz, however, was a different matter. He galloped into Dan's path, intercepting Dan's halberd with his own. That single strike was all that Rietz needed to understand just how powerful a foe he was facing, while Dan sensed that Rietz was no ordinary opponent. Rietz looked slender and frail at a glance, but the size of his muscles belied their strength. In a contest of pure brawn, the men were evenly matched.

"Oh? I've never met a Malkan who could cross blades with me," said Dan with a raised eyebrow as he took in Rietz's appearance. "These aren't your lands. What business do you have on a Missian battlefield?"

"I'm certainly not here to exchange pleasantries with the likes of you," Rietz curtly replied, then raised his halberd and shot Dan a pointed glare. "I intend to claim your head, and offer it to Lord Ars."

"So some oddball on the other side took you on as their retainer? Can't say I don't see the logic. Anyone strong enough can make a decent servant, be they a Malkan or a gorilla," said Dan, readying his own weapon in turn. "You should

know the name of the man who's about to kill you. I am Dan Allest."

"Rietz Muses."

With their names declared, the two warriors charged forward and began a furious mounted duel. Each of them was a master in his own right, and their skill was a stunning thing to behold. To lesser men, fighting on horseback would be a hindrance—one simply couldn't take up a stable stance while mounted. Rietz and Dan, however, swung their weapons with unimpaired power and grace, their movements in such perfect unison with their horses' one would think they shared a perfect mental connection with the creatures. The horses dodged and leaped about the field while their riders delivered blow after blow, trying to sneak a fatal strike into their foes' blind spot.

From an outside perspective, the two of them looked evenly matched, but on closer observation, one might have noticed a pall of panic spreading across Dan's face.

Damn, he's good, thought Dan. And a hell of a lot stronger than he looks... His blows are fast, heavy, and he knows how to feint, too. He's no ordinary soldier, that's for damn sure!

Before he knew it, Dan found himself fighting a purely defensive battle.

"Graaah!" shouted one of Dan's men, who rushed in to back up his leader. Rietz didn't miss a beat, dodging the attack effortlessly and slicing the man in half with a single stroke, but it proved enough of a distraction to open him up to attack for a brief moment. Dan wasn't the sort of man who'd give up that sort of opportunity for the sake of honor—if he had a chance to slay his enemy, he'd take it, and he meant to do just that, swinging his halberd for Rietz's neck.

This was not, however, Rietz's first battle by a long shot. He knew that

dropping his guard could mean instant death, and the moment he realized that Dan's attack was coming from an angle he couldn't intercept, he gave up on blocking it altogether, instead twisting to the side and dodging the strike. In the same motion, he unsheathed a dagger with his left hand, striking back while Dan was too committed to his swing to stop his momentum.

"Agh!" Dan shouted as Rietz's slash landed and a spray of blood erupted from his right arm. It was a deep cut, and Rietz could tell how effective it had been from the feel of the strike alone. Dan wouldn't be able to parry Rietz's attacks with his arm in that state, and now it was Rietz's turn to seize the advantage and bring his halberd down with all his might. Dan tried to raise his guard, but as expected, his injured arm wasn't up to the task. His halberd fell limply to his side, and just like that, Rietz cleaved through his neck in a flash.

Dan's head toppled from his shoulders. Blood sprayed out from the stump of his neck as his head plummeted toward the ground until Rietz caught it midair and hoisted it aloft.

"Dan Allest is slain!" he cried at the top of his lungs, the news resounding across the battlefield.

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I watched Rietz's battle from afar, and reflected on just how incredible a person he was as he brought down the enemy's monster of a commander. I'd been on the edge of my saddle with worry, but in the end, my fears had been groundless. With that, the enemy's chain of command had been severed, and Dan's death sent an immediate wave of distress through the rest of his men.

“The time is now! Wipe them out!” shouted Rietz, rallying his fellow soldiers onward. The rest of the front line had been cowed by the might of the enemy cavalry, but this stunning development helped them regain their momentum. Taking advantage of the enemy’s confusion, they brought down one rider after the next.

One soldier who appeared to be the enemy’s second-in-command did his best to bring his subordinates back into formation, but unfortunately for them, he didn’t seem to be a capable leader and it wasn’t going well. Eventually, their force broke under the pressure of our concentrated attack, and the remaining survivors scattered in all directions, fleeing into the woods. The thick foliage and lack of roads, of course, meant that those who rode into the trees couldn’t gallop at full pace, making them sitting ducks for our archers and mages. Those who turned around and fled back the way they came, meanwhile, were cut down by the Maitraw Company.

What was once a very sizable enemy contingent had been just about slain to the man. We’d made massive gains in the battle at large, and in almost no time at all. We had yet to defeat the lord of Castle Rolto, to be fair, but with their cavalry regiment decimated, they’d lost their most powerful weapon by far.

“If we press this advantage, we can defeat the lord who leads their army!” shouted Lumeire.

I had assumed that the rest of the enemy force would have fled, but it seemed that wasn’t the case. Instead, they’d advanced on the forest in an attempt to save their encircled cavalry division. We held more of a numerical advantage than ever now, and what troops they had left weren’t anywhere near as dangerous as their cavalry had been. To make matters even worse for our foes, their hurried advance had left them with no time to come together in

a proper formation, leaving them unprepared to fend off our attack. In my eyes, our victory was all but assured.

Our first move was to declare to their remaining forces that Dan Allest was dead. It seemed he was a well-known man among their troops, and the news of his death sent obvious waves of shock through their ranks. The Maitraw Company took advantage of their distress by choosing that moment to launch a preemptive attack, charging forward with Clamant at their head. There were only around five hundred or so of them, but each of them rode a horse and was strong in their own right. They crashed into the enemy lines, striking down their foes left and right and sending their army into a state of pandemonium.

“Claim Jean’s head!” commanded Lumeire.

As our whole army surged forward, a few enemy soldiers began to break ranks and flee. Their leader Jean, however, seemed to have no intention of falling back.

“Retreat is not an option! We fight to the bitter end!” he shouted, his voice amplified by sound magic.

No amount of encouragement could change the fact that his troops were at a severe disadvantage, though. They were outnumbered, their chain of command was crumbling, and in the end, they were unable to recover from all the setbacks they’d faced. Our men mowed them down, one after another, and before long the troops who’d come from outside the county to reinforce Jean’s army began to retreat en masse. After some time, Jean himself was slain. The battle was over, and we had won.

With Jean dead and his army routed, there was nothing left to stop us from marching on and occupying Castle Rolto. The vast majority of the enemy forces had sortied along with their leader, leaving only a skeleton crew to stay behind at the castle. In light of their lord's death, those troops quickly surrendered, leaving the stronghold to us.

The occupation of the castle hadn't been one of our initial objectives, but it was deemed necessary on account of the County of Balton's forces. The five thousand reinforcements they'd sent to help Jean hadn't been wiped out, and they also didn't represent the county's entire standing army. There were still more soldiers left in the County of Balton, and while the risk of them mounting an offensive was minimal, it also wasn't a factor we could afford to disregard.

As such, our objective shifted. While once our only goal was to stop the advance of Jean's army, now we were tasked with occupying Castle Rolto and keeping the County of Balton's army in check. In theory, having the castle under our control would prevent them from moving about freely. Last but not least, after Castle Rolto was under our control, a banquet was called to celebrate our success.

"What a battle! What a *victory*! And we owe it all to you, Ars!" shouted Lumeire. He was red-faced, inebriated, and in the highest of spirits. At the end of the day our casualties had been quite minor, and in his eyes that meant that the battle had been an overwhelming success.

"I don't think I can take the credit for this one," I replied. "My retainers deserve your praise more, and Rietz in particular."

“Your retainers are certainly a cut above, I’ll admit! They’re enough to make a man downright envious! I saw Rietz’s duel, you know? Dan was a fearsome foe, but Rietz cut him down with ease! Splendid, my boy!” Lumeire gushed.

He wasn’t the only one singing Rietz’s praises that evening. All the soldiers who’d witnessed his moment of heroism were abuzz with excited discussion about him. The better part of the army had taken him rather lightly up to now on account of his Malkan heritage, but slaying an enemy leader seemed to have done wonders when it came to broadening most of their perspectives. They knew now that they’d been underestimating him, so Rietz’s popularity with his fellow soldiers had skyrocketed.

That wasn’t to say that all of them had abandoned their prejudices, of course, and some of those who still didn’t think much of Rietz seemed quite irked by all the attention he was getting. I considered taking steps to ensure that they didn’t get the chance to attack him...but considering how physically and mentally tough Rietz was, I figured he could take care of himself if push came to shove.

“Oh, good food, how I’ve missed you! This is almost too delicious!” said Charlotte between mouthfuls. After all that complaining about our trail rations, she was so excited by the feast that she ended up shoveling her meal down with voracious enthusiasm. I had to admit that eating something with flavor for the first time in ages did make it taste a lot better than usual. I’d put away my fair share of dishes as well, though I wasn’t even close to keeping up with her.

“Gra hah hah! Keep the booze flowing!” bellowed Mireille. She’d been banned from drinking while we were on the war trail, and wetting her whistle for the first time in weeks had done wonders for her mood. The war wasn’t over yet, but I figured this was as good a time as any to let her cut loose.

I, in contrast, had found myself in a corner of the banquet hall where I could sit down, eat, and survey the crowd. As I did so, I happened to find my attention drawn to Rosell. He seemed to be deep in thought, mulling something over with a frown on his face. He'd never been the type to participate in the more raucous side of this sort of gathering, and his age meant that he couldn't drink even if he were into that sort of thing, seeing as this world had the same values about children drinking as my old world had. While Rosell being off to the sidelines was nothing unusual, the air of anxiety he gave off as he pondered got me curious. I considered letting my retainers air their worries to me as part of my responsibilities as a lord, so I decided to go chat him up.

"Hey, Rosell," I said as I drew close to him. "Something on your mind?"

"You could say that," said Rosell. "Tell me, Ars...what do you think about how everyone's behaving?"

"Not sure what to say, honestly. They just won a major victory, so I think it's good for everyone to take this chance to celebrate."

"That's *exactly* the problem! You're all taking this too lightly! Yes, we dealt with the reinforcements before they reached Staatz, and sure, we took the castle, but everyone's still making merry when our biggest objective is still up in the air! We haven't won until the main force conquers Castle Staatz!"

It seemed he was already thinking about—or rather, fixating on—what was to come in the near future.

"You have a point. But as long as the reinforcements they were hoping for never come, I don't think Castle Staatz stands much of a chance, does it?"

"You're being way too optimistic, Ars. We need to get a handle on the state of the war as soon as possible, and maybe even send reinforcements of our own

to back the main force up. Though then again, I suppose that if they're on track for an easy victory, staying here and keeping our eyes peeled for the Balton army could be worthwhile too."

"You're right about that. We can't let our guards down. Lord Couran would've sent a messenger if he'd already taken Castle Staatz, and we've received no such thing so far. It seems more likely than not that the battle has yet to be decided, as things stand."

Castle Staatz's defenses were rumored to be impregnable. It was a mountain citadel, which made it a rarity given that most of Missian was made up of flatlands. I wouldn't have been at all surprised to learn that the assault on the castle was moving at a snail's pace.

"Yeah, maybe you do have a point..."

"You should ask the Shadows to survey Castle Staatz's current status!" said Rosell. "That'll give us the info we need to plan our next move for sure!"

He seemed very enthusiastic about the recommendation, and I knew very well how smart Rosell was. I was starting to feel a little anxious after everything he'd told me, as well, so I decided to take him up on the idea and ask the Shadows to look into Castle Staatz.

I called Pham over to discuss the new plan. He was also participating in the banquet, though he'd arrived in his maid disguise and was stone cold sober, unlike most everyone else. I was glad to see that I'd be able to have a proper conversation with him, even at a time like this.

"So? What's the job this time?" asked Pham.

"I want you to look into the current status of Castle Staatz," I explained.

“More information gathering, eh? You know you’ve got scouts for that sort of grunt work, right?” said Pham with a roll of his eyes.

“Maybe, but I don’t trust our scouts to be even half as fast and accurate as your crew,” I countered. Clandestine operations were just one of the Shadows’ many areas of expertise—they were also capable of collecting information with incredible speed and precision. I probably could’ve tasked them with something more challenging, considering how good at their jobs they were, but I couldn’t change the fact that what I needed above all else at that moment was basic information.



“Have it your way. As long as you have the coin for the job, of course,” said Pham.

“Naturally,” I replied. I was glad to see him take the job in spite of his grumbling, and I expected him to head off and get to work right away, but instead, he spoke directly to me.

“So, you have some sorta power that lets you see what people are capable of, right?”

“That’s right. What about it?”

I’d given him a basic explanation of my skill back when I first met him. I’d managed to see through his disguise and realize he was a guy, and Pham had interrogated me about how I’d managed to do so.

“What’s that power of yours say about me? What are my capabilities like? Good? Useless?”

“Huh?”

This was a surprise. I hadn’t taken Pham for the sort of person to ask a question like that. I’d assumed he was the type to have a perfect understanding of his own strengths, and to go through life with absolute confidence in his abilities. I didn’t have any particular reason not to tell him, though. I’d appraised him before, and I’d seen that while he didn’t excel in all areas, he did have remarkably high Valor and Intelligence stats, which meant that he was capable indeed.

“Guess I don’t need to ask,” Pham continued. “I’m plenty competent, right?”

“Right. You seem very confident about that.”

“Well, I do have a pretty decent grasp of what I’m capable of. What I can’t do

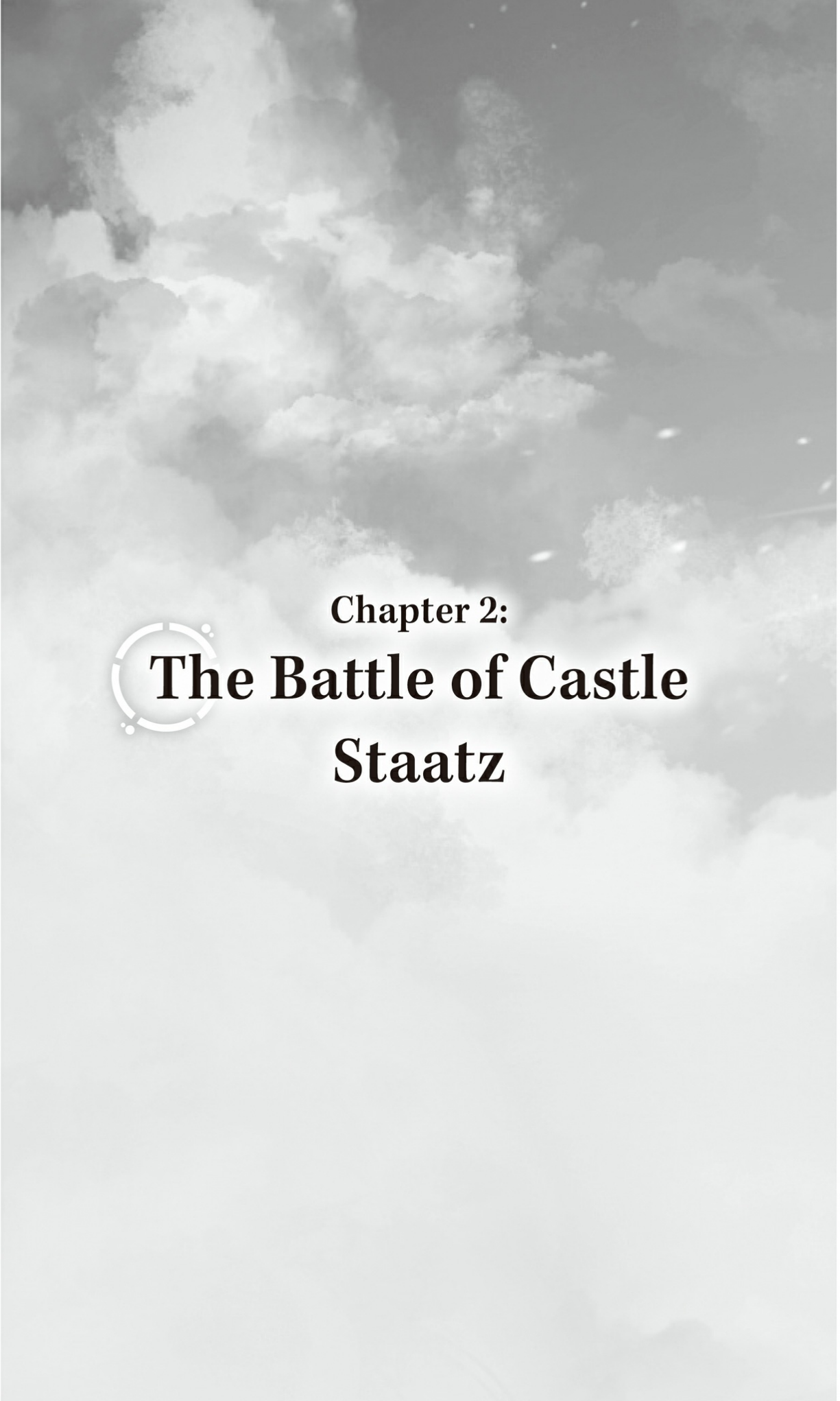
is know where everyone else falls on the spectrum, and explaining what you can do to someone is harder than you'd think. That power of yours is something that anyone in a position of authority would want. Hell, I'm just the leader of a band of mercs, and even I want it," said Pham. He seemed to regard my power quite well.

"Ars Louvent," he continued. "I've got a feeling you could go big places."

I'd always gotten the impression that Pham looked down on me, but apparently, I'd been mistaken. To the contrary, the way he was acting now made it seem like he had a high opinion of me, much to my surprise.

"Okay, duty calls," Pham said, then went off to work. I had the strangest feeling that he'd had something else he wanted to say to me, but I figured I might've just been imagining it. Even if he did have something he wished to discuss, another opportunity was sure to present itself before long, so I saw no reason to drag it out of him.

The Shadows were on their way to scope out Castle Staatz, and until they returned, the rest of us would just have to stand by in Castle Rolto and wait for news.



Chapter 2:

The Battle of Castle Staatz

While Ars's contingent laid claim to Castle Rolto, Couran and his division were hard at work carrying out their advance on Castle Staatz. The enemy had attempted to obstruct their progress by deploying troops to major roads on the way to the castle, but Couran's army proved too massive to delay for long. His sheer numerical advantage was demoralizing for his foes, and what little opposition there was to his advance quickly retreated.

"I'd think they were hoping to buy themselves more time than this. They don't have a surplus of it," Couran calmly speculated as he watched the enemy force fall back.

"They may have fewer troops available than we'd planned for," said Robinson, Couran's right-hand man and an ever-valuable source of analysis on the state of the war. "Castle Staatz is said to be a mighty fortress, but if the difference in numbers is that vast, they may still find it impossible to defend it against our force."

"And that's not even considering our aqua magia reserves," noted Couran. "Magic rules the modern battlefield, and even the sturdiest fortifications can't withstand it forever. We'll maintain our momentum and press the attack!"

Couran's forces moved onward, their morale soaring to greater and greater heights, never once noticing the trap that they were about to stumble into.

Kanses, the Count of Velshdt, Thomas, Vasmarque's trusted tactician, and Stefan Dolucha, the Baron of Staatz, had all gathered up in the study of Castle Staatz to discuss the state of the war.

"The momentum of our enemy's advance has far exceeded what we expected," Kanses muttered, his voice dispirited. "At this rate, not even Castle Staatz itself will be able to hold them off for long..."

"W-Worry not, Lord Kanses! My castle once repelled an army tens of thousands strong! No matter how many men they throw at our walls, I swear to you that we won't let them best us!" said Stefan. He was a man with a large build and a fearsome countenance, his face decorated with a variety of scars he'd earned in the countless battles he'd participated in.

Thomas, however, did not share Stefan's optimism.

"Castle Staatz is well-fortified, Sir Stefan, I'll grant you that, but the era of one fortress holding off tens of thousands of men is long gone. Now that magic's in play, there's no such thing as an impregnable castle anymore, and Couran's force has enough explosive aqua magia in stock to level this place a dozen times over."

"U-Ugh," grunted Stefan. His displeasure was obvious, but he had no counterargument to Thomas's claim. Far from it—his ample experience in battle told him that Thomas was correct.

"If we want to hold onto this castle, we can't let its walls do all the work for us. We'll have to have all sorts of tricks ready for them to help us win this battle," Thomas continued with a malicious smirk.

"Should I take that to mean you have a plan in mind?" asked Kanses.

"It's simple, really. If their magic's their scariest weapon, we just have to take

it away from them. We'll aim to take out the enemy's explosive aqua magia reserves," Thomas explained.

"Hmm... That would make a great deal of difference, but surely our enemy knows how important their aqua magia is? Do you believe they'll just let us destroy it?" countered Kanes.

"I happen to know what sort of man Couran is," said Thomas. "He's a soldier and statesman born, but he's missing that one last, little piece that lets a man follow through and makes him great. That's what sets him and Lord Vasmarque apart. He's got the upper hand right now, to be sure, but that just means he's all the more likely to let his guard slip."

"Hmm. And you're so certain of this that you feel confident your plan will succeed?" asked Kanes.

"Oh, no need to worry about that. Just leave it all to me," replied Thomas.

Just then, a man dressed in a light, nondescript fashion arrived to deliver a message to Thomas.

"The enemy's aqua magia reserves are on the move," the messenger reported.

"Good! About time," said Thomas.

"There are fewer troops guarding it than anticipated," the messenger continued. "There's one problem, though..."

"What is it?"

"The reserves have been split up for transportation, and there's no way of telling which unit is carrying their explosive aqua magia."

"So they're keeping their reserves spread out," said Thomas. "They could lose

every drop of their fire aqua magia and not miss it, as long as the explosive aqua magia's untouched... Maybe Couran's taking this more seriously than I gave him credit for."

Explosive magic had the potential to tear down the castle's walls outright, and posed far and away the greatest danger to its defenders. If their stock of the requisite aqua magia had been dispersed throughout a number of units, then it would be much harder to eliminate all of it with any degree of certainty. An assault on the convoys would become a gamble, and Thomas was *not* a gambling man.

"Lord Thomas!" shouted another of Thomas's men, who arrived as he was mulling over the problem. He had sent out a number of his subordinates to scope out Couran's army and get a grasp of the situation. "Our scouts in the vicinity of Castle Samkh have reported new information regarding the enemy units carrying their explosive aqua magia! It's split up among five units that are all separate, and we have scouts tailing each of them at this very moment."

"Are you absolutely sure about that?" asked Thomas.

"Yes, my lord! It seems the enemy troops have grown complacent after their recent victories. Several of their soldiers let the information slip after we plied them with alcohol, and since they all told the same story, we've determined that it's reliable!"

"Well, that changes things. I guess I wasn't giving Couran too little credit after all—he's been keeping his men on far too long of a leash. I bet he thinks he's already won. We'll move out at once!" said Thomas as he stood up from his seat.

"Already?" Kanes asked, shocked. "And you plan to lead the attack yourself?"

“If we’re going to take advantage of this opening, then we can’t waste a minute,” Thomas explained. “Plus, this operation could turn the tide of battle. Of course I have to see it through in person.”

“Y-Yes, I suppose that makes sense... Very well, then. I’ll entrust this task to you, Thomas,” said Kanes.

“Consider it done,” Thomas replied with a confident smirk.

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Thomas handpicked five squads to participate in his plan, and instructed each of them to lay in ambush along roads that the enemy convoys would be traveling. Sending one larger unit to carry out the attack wasn’t an option—if the enemy managed to send word to the other convoys after the first was assaulted, their guards would be raised and the rest of the mission would be jeopardized. They’d have to carry out their attacks simultaneously in order to maintain the element of surprise.

Of course, since each convoy was traveling a different route, carrying out simultaneous attacks upon them was easier said than done. That was where magic entered the picture: they would use sound magic to keep in contact with the other squads. Specially designed catalyzers allowed long-distance communication by way of the Transmit spell, but that spell was not without limitations: it could only send sounds across a distance proportional to the size of the catalyzer.

Large catalyzers could cast Transmit across great distances, but were less than portable and wouldn’t be practical for Thomas’s operation. Mid-sized

catalyzers, on the other hand, would just barely be able to send sounds across the distances necessary, assuming everything went as planned. In the end, Thomas decided that the mid-sized catalyzer option was enough, and equipped each unit with a catalyzer and a mage to operate it.

Thomas himself would not join up with any one particular unit. Instead, he took up position at a point equidistant from the sites where the ambushes would be carried out, accompanied by a mage capable of casting sound magic. From there, he could give instructions to all five units at once.

Thomas waited, carefully gauging the right moment to strike. After waiting there for a long period of time, when each unit reported in sequence that they had eyes on their target convoy, Thomas turned to his mage and said, "Give them the order to attack."

The mage cast Transmit at once, sending Thomas's order out to all five squads. The squads, in turn, sprung their ambushes without delay. Soon, reports of each squad's success began coming in one after another, which Thomas replied to by instructing them to withdraw from the battlefield with all due haste. Out of the five units tasked with the job, four reported complete success. The final squad, however, had been up against skilled foes. They'd proven too much for Thomas's men to handle, and had escaped with their cargo intact.

"Well, so it goes," said Thomas with a shrug. "Even if one of them got away, we've still come out far ahead today. Tell the last squad to withdraw."

With that, Thomas and his mage fell back as well, making for Castle Staatz once more.

“They *what*?!”

Couran’s face flushed with shock and fury when he heard the report. The five convoys transporting his army’s stock of explosive aqua magia had been targeted with pinpoint precision, and the ambushes had resulted in the loss of all but a fifth of their aqua magia supply.

“It seems the details of our transportation channels were leaked to the enemy. We arranged for the aqua magia to be split up and transported by multiple convoys in an effort to protect them, but that decision has backfired,” said Robinson.

Couran scowled and clicked his tongue with frustration.

“If we’d transported all of it together, then an unforeseen disaster or an enemy raid could have wiped out our entire supply in one fell swoop. Splitting it up may have prevented that worst-case scenario, yes, but barely... How much aqua magia was the remaining convoy transporting?”

“Frankly, very little,” Robinson answered. “Not enough to bring down the walls of Castle Staatz, anyway.”

Couran’s frown grew deeper still. He had been counting on an overwhelming advantage in the upcoming conflict, and this news was a painful blow to his plan.

“We left behind a stock of excess aqua magia in Semplar, didn’t we? Have all of it brought here.”

“Very well, Your Lordship,” said Robinson. “However, I’m afraid that transporting that stock here will take quite some time...”

“All the more reason to send word on the double. If winter falls before the castle is in our hands, then our plans to take Velshdt will be set back.”

“As you command. I’ll have a messenger sent to Semplar right away,” Robinson replied, then departed to carry out his orders. Couran was left to cross his arms and groan at the miserable situation he’d found himself in.

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The day after I dispatched the Shadows to look into the state of things at Castle Staatz, Lumeire called together a council of war where I reported on my decision. It would take some time for word to arrive, and until then, it was decided that we would hold our position and monitor any movements of the County of Balton’s army.

A few days later, the Shadows returned with news for me.

“We’ve gotten a handle on the situation in Staatz,” reported Ben, who’d been dispatched to speak with me. His face was as plain and unmemorable as ever, though after many meetings with him, I’d learned to recognize him without confirming his identity with an appraisal.

“Let’s hear it.”

“Starting with the biggest point, the castle hasn’t fallen yet. It looks like it’s been a pretty close fight, and both sides are struggling.”

I wasn’t too surprised to hear that. Couran’s army was far larger than Staatz’s defending force, but I’d accurately predicted that the castle’s defenses would make it a difficult target to deal with.

“Is Castle Staatz just that defensible, then?” I asked, hoping to confirm my theory.

“Well, that too,” said Ben, “but reinforcements from Castle Velshdt reached Staatz and wreaked havoc on Couran’s troops. They ambushed shipments of aqua magia, and managed to take out most of Couran’s explosive aqua magia in the process. Seems that’s what’s slowing him down more than anything else.”

That was grave news, to be sure. Explosive aqua magia was the functional equivalent of siege engines in this world. Bringing a castle down without it was a tall order, and Castle Staatz’s magical defenses were sturdy to begin with. The loss of that much aqua magia would make conquering it a much harder task. The situation was even worse than I’d anticipated.

“What’s Couran doing to deal with the issue? Is there a delivery of explosive aqua magia inbound?” I asked.

“Yes, but by the time it gets to him it’ll be winter, and storming the castle will be harder than ever,” said Ben. It was currently the sixth month, which was around the time that the cold started setting in. It did seem quite possible that winter would arrive before the battle was finished unless the situation changed.

Couran’s forces were already encamped near the castle, presumably, so it wouldn’t be impossible for them to stage an assault in the wintertime. That being said, carting around provisions and resources was a lot harder when you had piles of snow in the way, which had the potential to cripple their ability to start a real fight.

The coldest period of the year lasted from the end of the sixth month through the start of the seventh, and once that period passed, the snow would melt and the battle could resume in earnest. In the grand scheme of things it wouldn’t be that long of a delay, but time was of the essence and ending the battle even a

day sooner could prove pivotal. Wasting somewhere around twenty days was very much something we'd be better off avoiding if possible.

"Good work. That's very good to know," I said to Ben, then went to report what I'd learned to Lumeire.

When Lumeire heard what I had to say, a frown passed across his face.

"How could this be...? I never dreamed the situation could be *this* grim," he muttered. "Isn't there anything we can do to help?"

"We can set out to aide Lord Couran's forces," I said. "We have a decent stock of explosive aqua magia here at Castle Rolto. I don't know if it'll be enough, but anything helps."

"I agree that we should send aid to Lord Couran," said Lumeire. "But how we go about sending it isn't such an easy decision to make."

"What do you mean by that?" I asked. Rushing off to Castle Staatz on the double seemed like the obvious method to me, and for that matter, I couldn't think of any alternatives.

"Aside from simply rushing to Lord Couran's aid, we could also stage our own assault from a different direction, catching Castle Staatz's defenders unprepared. A characteristic trait of defensive magic is that their strength is not evenly distributed. There are weak points in any barrier system, and if we can catch the enemy off guard and attack one of those weak points, we may be able to break through. There are two paths from here to Castle Staatz, as well: the road we took to get here, and another, smaller route. If we were to take that path and attack the enemy without warning, we may very well emerge victorious."

It wasn't a proposal without risks. If the enemy was aware that Castle Rolto

had fallen, then it was possible their defenses would be prepared for such an attack. Even so, it still seemed probable that a surprise attack would be more effective than walking up and joining the main force.

“Staging a surprise attack makes sense to me,” I said, “but I think it would be a good idea to speak with everyone else before we settle on a plan.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” said Lumeire, “but we should choose a course of action as soon as possible. Call together the most exceptional of your retainers at once.”

“Understood,” I replied.

It didn’t take long to bring my retainers together, and we commenced our council without delay. To start, I explained the current state of things at Castle Staatz to everyone.

“I see. It seems the situation is dire indeed,” said Rietz after I was finished.

“Your brother was supposed to be in Velshdt, right, Master?” Rosell asked, turning to Mireille. “Do you think he’s helping defend Staatz?”

“I give it nine out of ten odds he is, yeah. I always taught him to zero in on his enemy’s weakest link and take it out, and it looks like he’s putting that method to good use in this battle,” said Mireille. She sounded quite blasé about the matter, considering that those teachings were the reason why Couran was in such a tough spot at the moment. She had taught her brother everything he knew ages ago, of course, so I supposed there wasn’t any real reason for her to be ashamed of her actions.

“Lord Lumeire and I have discussed the matter, and agreed that the situation is grave enough to merit backing Lord Couran up,” I explained. “That said, Lord Lumeire has also proposed that traveling in secret and striking the enemy at

their weakest point in an ambush could prove even more effective.”

“I was hoping to hear all of your opinions on my proposal,” said Lumeire.

“How much explosive aqua magia does this castle have in stock?” asked Mireille. “My answer could change depending on what we have to work with. If it’s a lot, then just delivering it to them would be our safest bet.”

“We have about three hundred Ms worth of it on hand,” I said. I’d anticipated the question and looked into our stockpile before the council started.

“That puts us in dicey territory. A single spell from a large catalyzer burns about thirty Ms. If we catch them off guard, aim for their barrier’s weakest point, and have Charlotte do the casting, we could take down one of their walls in two or three shots. Head-on, though, three hundred Ms worth of magic wouldn’t even be enough to bring down the barrier.”

“So then our only option is a surprise attack?” I asked.

“Not necessarily. We could stage an ambush to distract the enemy, as well. We’d have to get into contact with...” Mireille paused and scowled. “*Lord Couran* beforehand to make sure he could coordinate with the feint, though.”

“A diversion, huh...?” I said.

“Personally, I’m down for the actual sneak attack,” Mireille continued. “We’d just have to pin down their defenses’ weak point, then have Charlotte blow a hole in their walls before they could do anything about it. Then, we send our troops storming in through the hole all at once, have them open the gates, break the catalyzers keeping their defenses up—y’know, just raise hell. At that point, it’d only be a matter of time before we could storm the main keep and bring it under our control. At least, I assume that’s the general plan. Storming the castle would mean plenty of fighting, and I’ve gotta say, I like the sound of

that.”

I wasn’t of a mind to settle on a plan based on whether or not Mireille would get to indulge her bloodlust, but still, she’d made a compelling case and I was half-convinced that the surprise attack plan was our best bet.

“I agree that a surprise attack is a good idea...but I’m concerned about the part where we have to find their defenses’ weak point,” said Rosell. “Do we have any documents regarding the layout of Castle Staatz?”

“We’ve searched this castle’s archives and found a document that includes a simple map of Castle Staatz. That being said, it doesn’t include anything that would be considered state secrets, such as the locations of traps,” Lumeire answered, then spread the map in question out on his desk.

“Their walls seem to enclose a pretty big area,” I muttered as I looked over the document. “Who knows how long it’d take to starve them out in a siege.”

It seemed there was a whole town within the castle’s curtain walls, which led me to the realization that ordinary townsfolk could get wrapped up in the battle to come.

“This’ll be the weak point we need,” said Mireille, pointing at a wall located on the castle’s northwestern edge.

“How do you know?” asked Lumeire.

“You need mages to man your magical defenses—there’s no way around that. The more skilled the mage, the stronger the barrier they can deploy. Thing is, one person can’t cover a castle this big on their own. They’ll need at least thirty or so mages for the job, I’d say, and that’s the minimum. The most important section of the castle wall to defend’ll be the main entrance on the south side—after all, if that gate gets blasted open, the enemy could surge in all at

once and storm the place. That'll be where their defenses are strongest. The northwestern side, meanwhile, doesn't have a gate at all and is located at the top of a slope, which means it'd be hard to assault at the best of times. The odds of an attack coming from that direction are low, so I imagine they'll have one of their less capable mages guarding it."

"I see," said Lumeire with a nod. "But wouldn't the fact that it's a difficult stretch of the wall to assault pose problems for our troops as well?"

"That's why we have to coordinate with Lord Couran," said Mireille. "If we can get him to launch a feint at the right moment, their attention will be focused on the main gate and we'll have higher odds of pulling it off. I can think of plenty of other plans that would get us through, too."

With the enemy's eyes on the main gate, they'd be unprepared to handle a surprise attack from a different direction. The plan seemed like a good one—we could up the odds of the entire operation succeeding with a little coordination.

"I believe the time has come, then, to contact Lord Couran regarding our plan. We can settle on the details once we've heard from him about the state of his force," Lumeire said, then began drafting a letter to send to Couran.

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Couran's forces had set up their encampment a short distance away from Castle Staatz. Couran himself sat in the headquarters they'd raised, running through the state of the war in his mind and searching for a plan that could win him the day.

Is waiting it out our only option? he pondered. *The battle started off so*

well—how has it come to this...?

The starting stages of the campaign had left Couran optimistic. His troops had fought their first engagement after reinforcements from Velshdt had attempted to block their path, and the battle had ended with those reinforcements fleeing in a total rout. He'd won battle after battle from that point onward, working his way to the vicinity of Castle Staatz itself. That was when his forces had lost the majority of their explosive aqua magia in a single day, and everything started going wrong.

Couran was left with very few resources capable of damaging the castle's outer walls. His force had been at a lack of competent mages to begin with, and with their stockpile of aqua magia so low, there was no chance of them blasting their way through the castle's gates. Ever since then, his army had maintained their position, sitting and waiting for an aqua magia delivery that would arrive after winter had finished setting in. That would cause major delays in the army's supply chain, rendering them unable to fight a protracted battle and buying their foes more time still.

Preventing that outcome was Couran's highest priority, but it wasn't the only problem he faced. His army's provisions were an issue as well. He had brought an extravagant quantity of food with him, but the longer the campaign dragged on, the more likely it became that he would have to retreat to restock and regroup. That was just one more reason why bringing the castle down before winter rolled in would be a major victory.

Considering the state of things, though, that may not even be possible... We've picked out weak points in the castle's defenses, but we lack the aqua magia to even break through those. And even if we do manage to do so by some miracle, the wall we'd destroy would be in a highly disadvantageous location. Unless the

enemy let their guard down to an astonishing degree, we'd have no hope of staging an assault...

Couran was beginning to think that his only choice would be to steel himself to make some sacrifices and attempt to claim the castle without the help of magic. Castle Staatz was strategically significant enough that taking it would be worthwhile, even if he did lose a large chunk of his troops in the process. That being said, if he were to accept the loss and mount an offensive, then fail to take the castle, it would put his campaign in a dire state and force him to withdraw from the county. That could give the enemy an opportunity to reclaim the castles and forts that Couran had already conquered, rendering everything he'd gained meaningless. That, above all else, was something he had to avoid.

"If only Ars and his followers were here, I'm sure they could dream up a plan to drag us out of this mire," Couran sighed. Preventing the forces at Castle Rolto from marching on his army had been an important task, and he'd felt the need to entrust it to someone he had faith in, but as of late he'd begun to question his judgment.

"Lord Couran!" said a soldier who came sprinting into the headquarters. "A letter has arrived for you!"

"Who is it from?" asked Couran.

"It bears the mark of Lord Lumeire!"

Lumeire—in other words, Ars's superior. That meant that the letter could very well contain a plan dreamed up by Ars himself, and with that thought in mind, Couran unfolded it without wasting a moment. Within, he found a proposal for a surprise attack and a request that his army coordinate with Lumeire's in said attack's execution.

A surprise attack... Yes, I see... This could very well break us out of our deadlock. If I act as if I've given up and decided to mount an all-out offensive, the enemy will turn all their attention onto me. That means they'll neglect the rest of the castle's defenses... The question, however, is whether or not the force I sent along with Lumeire is up to the task of storming the castle. Castle Staatz's garrison is sizable, and it won't be easy for Lumeire to fight his way to the defensive catalyzers and their mages. Perhaps I should send a division—of two thousand, say—to maneuver around the castle in secret and back up Lumeire and his troops.

His mind abuzz with ideas, Couran began drafting his reply to the letter at once.

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After the success of Thomas's plan to eliminate the enemy's aqua magia supplies, he, Kanes, and Stefan once again gathered in Castle Staatz's study.

"The situation could be far worse," said Kanes after reviewing the current state of the war.

"I must admit that the difference in numbers puts us at a disadvantage, but thanks to Sir Thomas's brilliant stratagem, the enemy's aqua magia reserves have been decimated. They may attempt to mount an attack regardless, but this castle will not prove so easily stormed," said Stefan with an air of confidence.

"I doubt they'll be going on the attack for a while yet...but I also don't think we should underestimate Couran," said Thomas. "He's not the type of man to

let a loss like this pass by without striking back, and he may still have a trick or two up his sleeve.”

“How do you mean?” asked Kanes.

“I haven’t verified this for sure, but I’ve gotten a few reports that somebody who looks an awful lot like my sister’s been sighted traveling with Couran’s troops.”

“Your sister? You mean Mireille?”

“That’s right. Doesn’t look like they’ve given her any real authority, though, so for all I know she won’t be that much of a problem. She could never make the most of her talents working under someone who doesn’t trust her.”

“I recall when her name first caught my attention. She caused quite the stir, and word had it she was a woman of prodigious talent...but I can hardly believe she would take up arms against her own brother.”

“Even if Mireille isn’t plotting something on their behalf, we can’t afford to give them the chance to reclaim an advantage,” said Thomas. “Now’s our chance. We need to take aim at their weakest link and win this war in one fell swoop.”

Kanes’s eyes widened at the prospect.

“A weakness that could earn us victory in a single blow? Does such a thing even exist?”

“It does. Couran himself.”

A skeptical look came across Kanes’s face.

“Couran himself? I’m not one to sing my enemy’s praises, but Couran is a man of many talents. I’ve fought by his side many a time, and know how formidable

he is firsthand.”

“Formidable, yes—and that’s what makes him their biggest vulnerability,” said Thomas. “By all rights, Couran shouldn’t be out on the battlefield. He should be back in Semplar, letting his vassals do the fighting for him. If Couran dies, then the war is over. Hardly any nobles would carry on his cause, and soon all of Missian would unite behind Lord Vasmarque. Couran has a son, yes, but that son is inexperienced and would find little support among his father’s former allies. Leading his troops himself was a risk, but Couran was unwilling to leave the command of his army to one of his men because he’s formidable enough to do the job better than anyone under his lead.”

“So you’re suggesting we strike Couran down on the battlefield?” asked Kanes. “I’ll admit, that would be an ideal outcome...but is it feasible?”

“Couran knows that if he kicks the bucket, it’s all over for his cause. He’ll be under heavy guard, no doubts there. That’s where I come in, though. There’s all sorts of ways to kill a man, and I know for a fact I can find the most likely one to pull the job off.”

“I’m glad to have a man as reliable as you on my side,” said Kanes.

“Thanks for that. I’ll be moving my plan to deal with Couran forward, and in the meantime, I want the two of you to bolster the castle’s defenses. Even the best-laid plans can fail, and if Couran manages to keep his head, we’ll be in for a tough fight.”

“Understood,” said Kanes with a nod.

Their strategy settled, Thomas began laying out the particulars of Couran’s imminent assassination.

A letter from Couran arrived at Castle Rolto. Lumeire opened it up at once and read its contents out loud. Couran had written to us in regard to the surprise attack we'd proposed, and began his letter with open praise, stating, "The state of this war has taken a disadvantageous turn, and your proposal to catch the enemy off guard could not have come at a better time. You have my gratitude."

Couran went on to theorize that our current troops wouldn't be enough to pull the attack off, so he offered to lend us men from his own division, specifying a time and place at which we could make contact with them. Furthermore, he wrote that he would be launching an attack on Castle Staatz in three days' time, and requested that we time our surprise attack to coincide with his offensive. Finally, he closed the letter by telling us to send him a response if there were any problems with the plan as he'd outlined it, but otherwise to begin our operation at once.

"What are your thoughts?" Lumeire asked, addressing me and my retainers. "Do you think we're ready to take action?"

"I don't believe there are any flaws in particular with this plan," said Rietz. "That said, I do think we'd do well to review our information on the enemy's castle over the course of our march."

Rosell and Mireille concurred, meaning the decision was unanimous. It would take three days for us to travel from Castle Rolto to Castle Staatz, meaning that if we wanted to time our attack with Couran's, we would have to depart right away. Fortunately, we'd been prepared for such an eventuality and our troops were already set to move out.

“Very well, then! We march on Castle Staatz!” Lumeire commanded. And just like that, our journey began.

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Our trip to Castle Staatz proceeded at a steady pace. We moved with as much stealth as we could manage, doing our best to not alert the enemy to our presence. I’d instructed the Shadows to move on ahead of us and keep watch over the area around Castle Staatz as well. That being said, I wanted Pham to stay nearby in case something unforeseen happened and I needed to change my instructions for them, so he ended up assigning one of his subordinates to handle all that intelligence gathering in his stead.

Eventually, we made contact with the soldiers that Couran had sent to help us. Their presence bolstered our numbers, and in turn raised the odds that our surprise attack would be a success. Soon afterward, the Shadows reported in with new information. Specifically, Ben was the one who made contact with me.

“We’ve noticed some suspicious movements around Castle Staatz,” said Ben. “A unit of mages made their way outside the castle walls, carrying a large-sized catalyzer with them. It looks like they’re trying not to be spotted.”

“Where are they going?” I asked.

“They’re making their way up a nearby mountain—one that would give them a vantage point over Couran’s entire army. Our best guess is that they’re trying to mount a surprise attack.”

That, I knew, could pose trouble. A surprise attack now could deal major

damage to Couran's forces.

"Are you talking about Mount Tourai?" asked Rosell.

"That's the one," confirmed Ben.

"Thought so. That's the only mountain that could give them a view of the whole army. But that's strange... They could see the whole army, yeah, but Mount Tourai's so far away from Lord Couran's encampment, there's no way they could cast spells at a long enough distance to do any damage. And stealth-wise, it'd be one thing if it were a squad of infantrymen, but bringing a large catalyzer means they'd be moving at a crawl! The odds of them getting spotted en route were high, and they should've known it... What're they playing at?" he muttered. It seemed he couldn't grasp the enemy's plan, this time.

"Okay, I see what's going on here. Thomas *would*," sighed Mireille.

"Would what? Have you figured out his plan?" I asked.

"Yup. Most likely, he's trying to take out Couran."

"What makes you say that?" I asked. She seemed confident enough in her theory that I assumed it had to have a basis.

"I told you before that my little brother's working for the enemy, right? Well, I'm pretty sure this operation's his doing," said Mireille.

Is she trying to say that she knows how her brother thinks well enough to predict his every move?

"What sort of operation is it, exactly?"

"It's true that not even a large catalyzer could deal any damage from that sort of range...*if* they were using it to cast offensive magic. That's not their plan, though—they'll be casting a spell called Downpour, which generates a heavy

rainstorm in a localized area. They'd be able to use Downpour to make it rain on Couran, even at that long of a distance."

"Okay, so they make it rain on him...and then what?"

"Couran's encampment is set up on barren soil. The roads in the area haven't been well maintained, and the ground goes muddy at the slightest hint of rain. A proper rainstorm means they'll be operating in a bog, and that means the army will lose its mobility. To top it all off, the sound of the rain will muffle any suspicious noises. Thomas's plan is to immobilize Couran, rob him of his sense of hearing, then carry out a surprise attack while he's unprepared. I'd bet he has units of soldiers setting up the ambush already—they've just managed to go undetected so far."

"And the goal of that ambush...is to assassinate Lord Couran?"

"That's about the gist of it."

My first instinct was to question whether a plan like that would be easy to pull off. For one thing, it seemed like it would be simple for Couran to wipe the unit of mages out. It was such a glaring flaw in the theory that I decided to ask about it.

"Why would Lord Couran just allow their mages to climb the mountain unopposed?"

"Because he has no idea what they're trying to do. At that distance, even mages would look harmless at a glance, so he'd assume they were up to something unrelated and decide that he couldn't spare the troops to deal with them. He might also suspect that they were trying to lure him into a trap."

She had a point there. When you don't know what your enemy's after, a single careless move has the potential to lose you your head.

“The death of Lord Couran would put our force in an unprecedented predicament,” said Rietz. He needn’t have bothered mentioning it, though, since I already understood that all too well. Without Couran to lead us, our invasion would lose all vestige of legitimacy and would inevitably collapse. I, meanwhile, would lose all hope of ever moving up in the world, and would even stand to lose the position I currently held. I could not allow Couran to die, no matter what.

“We’ll have to send a message to Lord Couran at once, and tell him to eliminate the unit heading for the mountain!” I said.

“That’d be great if it worked, but odds are good the warning wouldn’t make it to him in time,” said Mireille. “It might not even be possible for his men to head them off anymore, considering how late in the game we’re learning about all this.”

“W-Well, yes...but...” I stammered.

“I said the odds are good they wouldn’t make it in time—good, not certain,” said Mireille. “So, yes, we should send somebody to help. Someone fast enough to make it there in time, and tough enough to pull Couran out of a deathtrap.”

Ben and Pham’s faces sprang to mind, and as luck would have it, Pham was still present in our unit. I’d be able to ask him to take on the task immediately.

“I can ask the Shadows to save him, then,” I said.

“Your spies, huh...? Guess they do stand the highest chance of pulling it off,” replied Mireille.

“I’ll talk to them right away!” I declared before rushing off to find and commission Pham.

“The big lord’s gonna bite it, huh? Tough break,” said Pham when I finished explaining the situation. He didn’t sound even remotely concerned about the problem, though of course, when all was said and done, it wasn’t his problem. “I assume we’ll be getting paid for this?” he asked.

“Y-Yes, of course. How much would you want for the job?”

“I want something other than money, actually,” said Pham.

He’d never asked for a non-monetary reward before, so I was a little taken aback.

“What *do* you want, then?”

“For you to make us your retainers.”

“Come again?”

“The thing about being a mercenary is it’s not stable living, and I’ve never been a fan of that sorta lifestyle. I’ve been carrying on our old leader’s legacy up until now, but I’ve started thinking that if I come across someone who looks worth serving, it might be time to give up on being a sellsword and go official.”

“And you think I’m worth serving?”

“That’s right. Your power to see through people is something else, and you’ve got a silver tongue that could compete with the best of ’em. There’s a lot about you that tells me you’re going places, and I wouldn’t mind tagging along for the ride.”

Saying he wouldn’t mind serving me was a rather condescending way to ask me to take him into my service, but on the other hand, there was very little I would’ve liked more than having the Shadows under my formal employ. I’d gotten the impression that Pham had wanted to talk to me about something the last time I sent him out to scout around, and now I had to wonder if that

something had been the matter of him formally joining up with House Louvent.

Maybe I wasn't just imagining him having a high opinion of me after all.

In any case, if he hadn't brought it up himself, I might've asked him to be my retainer at some point in the near future. The Shadows' services had become an essential cornerstone of my operations, after all.

"Very well. I would be glad to accept you into my service."

"Then this deal's sealed. Let's try to make this arrangement a long-lasting one...assuming we pull this mission off to begin with, I mean."

With those ominous parting words, Pham sped off to rescue Couran from the mortal peril he'd soon find himself in.

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Ever since his plan to bring down Castle Staatz had been set in stone, Couran had been biding his time, waiting for the moment to strike. By the current schedule, tomorrow would be the day that he staged an all-out assault on the fortress. He had faith that he would manage to bring it under his control within the day, assuming Lumeire's troop did their job.

Of course, I'm not entirely without worries, Couran thought. He'd received a report that a group of enemy soldiers had been spotted lugging a large catalyzer away from the battlefield and toward Mount Tourai. No matter how long Couran spent pondering the matter, he just couldn't think of any reason why sending a unit there would be to his enemy's benefit.

There was no way they could attack his army with magic from that distance,

but the fact that Thomas was working with his foe meant that he couldn't discount the possibility the move was part of some elaborate scheme. Much as it pained Couran, so long as he couldn't determine what the enemy was up to, he knew that taking action would be too dangerous, so he was forced to just monitor the situation instead.

"My deepest apologies, Lord Couran," said Robinson. "It is my duty to see through this sort of scheme, yet I find myself lacking any useful insight..."

"No need to agonize over the matter, Robinson," said Couran. "After all, we've no guarantee that this is an enemy plot to begin with!"

As far as he was concerned, so long as he couldn't identify any schemes that the enemy might be carrying out, he might as well assume that they were just coping with some unexpected trouble of their own. There was no guarantee they were trying to accomplish something damaging to his cause after all.

Just then, the steady patter of rainfall began to ring out from outside Couran's headquarters. Not just a drizzle, either—it was a sudden and heavy downpour.

"Rain?" Couran said quizzically. "How strange. The sky was clear as could be just moments ago."

"Unusual indeed..." mumbled Robinson.

Going from clear skies to a sudden rainstorm was unusual in this part of the world, but far from unheard of. Couran, however, couldn't help but feel a vague sense of unease at this new development.

"Lord Couran!" shouted a mage who came rushing over at a frenzied sprint.

"What is it?" asked Couran.

"This rain—it's not natural! It's the work of magic! Most likely, the troops on Mount Tourai used their large catalyzer to cast it!"

“Water magic?” said Couran. “I suppose Velshdt is a source of water-aspected magistones... But why would they—?”

“An ambush! It’s the only explanation!” shouted Robinson.

“We must order our troops to ready themselves for battle at once,” said Couran. “But our words won’t carry in this storm... Mage! I have need of your sound magic!”

“Yes, Milord!” said the mage, who began preparing a spell at once. However, shouts and cries began to ring out throughout the camp long before he finished his work.

“Aaaaugh!”

“W-We’re under attack!”

“*Hellfire!*” roared Couran. The battle had begun before he could even warn his men, much less give them orders. Now that his troops were in a panic, they were less likely to hear or heed his words than ever. Having fought on many a battlefield, Couran knew that his predicament was a grave one.

“They’re after your life, Lord Couran! Please, flee at once!” shouted Robinson.

Couran had already drawn the same conclusion, but running away was easier said than done. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind that his foes’ trap was well-laid, and that they were sealing off all potential escape routes. The rain made it difficult to tell when they were drawing near, as well, reducing Couran’s ability to take the initiative. The wrong choice could usher him to an early grave.

Nevertheless, Couran did what he could. To start, he called out to all the soldiers within earshot of him, ordering them to form up and protect him. Couran intended to hold position, defending himself as best as he could until more of his men came running to save him. He’d ordered the mage from before

to use sound magic to command the rest of his troops first to calm themselves, and second, to make their way to Couran's position.

His foes, however, proved more clever than Couran had counted on. They were on him before he knew it, and they were skilled fighters to boot. Couran kept his most elite soldiers within his proximity as a matter of course, but now, those elites were being overwhelmed. Finally, an enemy soldier broke through their lines and dashed toward Couran himself.

Couran parried his foe's blow with his blade, then cut him down before he could strike again. That wasn't the end, though. Moments later, several more soldiers slipped past Couran's guard and set upon him, intent on claiming his head. Couran fought his best, and performed admirably considering the circumstances, but doing battle with several skilled fighters at once was a tall order. Defeating multiple elites acting in unison bordered on the impossible, and while Couran managed to cut down three of his foes, the final remaining enemy slipped an attack past his guard, aiming for his neck.

I can't dodge! Am I done for?! Is this where I meet my end?!

In that split second, Couran resigned himself to his fate...but before his foe could lop his head off his shoulders, a gash opened in the soldier's neck. He collapsed to the ground in a spray of blood, dead on the spot. Someone had dispatched him with the throw of a single knife. Couran wheeled about in shock to look at the knife's owner, and was shocked once more to find that his savior appeared to be a mere child. In truth, of course, he was nothing of the sort. He was Pham, and he had arrived in the nick of time to prevent the assassination from going as planned.

Pham dashed through the battlefield, cutting down one foe after the next. Couran, meanwhile, couldn't contain his astonishment to see what he assumed

was a little girl slaying his enemy's elite strike force with ease. Soon, though, Couran shook off his shock, took up his sword once more, and rejoined the battle.

While Pham and Couran slew the enemy's most skilled soldiers, Ben was nearby, slowly but surely whittling away at their less capable counterparts. He'd never been one for flashy displays, but what he lacked in style he made up for in consistent, unassuming skill.

By this point, the vicinity had descended into a chaotic melee. Couran, Pham, and Ben found themselves standing back to back to back, guarding each other's blind spots.

"I know you. Aren't you Ars's maid?" asked Couran. He'd only caught glimpses of Pham in the past, but the supposed maid's face had stuck in his mind.

"I'm one of the Shadows," Pham replied, still striking down his foes even as he spoke. "I'm here to rescue you under Ars's orders."

"Then I do know you—Ars speaks highly of your skills," said Couran. "I hate to put a damper on your attempted rescue, but this situation seems...well, less than survivable. We're rather outnumbered."

Couran's foes, taking advantage of their superior coordination, had seized the opportunity to descend on his position en masse. No matter how elite of a fighter his newfound ally may have been, he knew that coping with numbers like those would be all but impossible.

"No need to worry. I have a plan," said Pham. "Any minute now..."

"Any minute...?" Couran repeated, when suddenly, the world was engulfed in darkness.

It was like night had fallen in the blink of an eye. Shouts and cries of confusion

rang out all around him, and at the same time, the clash of blades and screams of his men as they were slain ceased. No matter how experienced a soldier might be, seeing a daylight battlefield be plunged into the dark of night was something no man could be prepared for, and as a result, the fighting had ceased in an instant.

As Couran hesitated, Pham whispered into his ear, "Whatever you do, don't raise a ruckus. This will only last a matter of minutes."

Then, he took Couran's hand and set off at a run, leading the lord along. He and Ben moved with such confidence one might've thought they could see in the dark, withdrawing from the battlefield with Couran in tow and their enemy none the wiser. As soon as they'd cleared the outskirts of the conflict, they began to sprint away as fast as their legs could carry them.

"What was that?" asked Couran.

"A type of shadow magic," said Pham. "Shadow-aspected aqua magia's precious stuff, and I try to conserve it, but that used up the last of my supply. We'll be doing slow business until we can stock up again."

"You can rest assured that you'll be well rewarded for your service today," said Couran. "I owe you both my life and my heartfelt gratitude."

"My employer's already scheduled to reward me...but I won't turn down a bonus."

The three men made their way up a nearby hill and looked out across the battlefield. A few minutes later, Pham's shadow magic faded away, just as he'd claimed, and just a moment after that, a voice amplified by sound magic boomed out across the battlefield: "We've found Couran! He's here!"

That voice, however, came from an entirely different direction than Couran

had run in.

“Is this your doing as well?” asked Couran.

“Just a bit of insurance,” answered Pham.

Thanks to the chaos sown by the shadow and sound magic, the enemy attack lost all cohesion. It wasn’t long before Couran’s men began to gain the upper hand, and sensing that the tide was turning against them, the attackers withdrew as quickly as they’d come.

“They’re retreating, then? I just hope Robinson and the others made it out of this alive... I must return to my men at once and prove to them that I’m all right.”

Couran had come to the conclusion that Thomas had, in all likelihood, led the surprise attack himself. The troops that had fallen on Couran’s army had been *too* coordinated—they were clearly operating under the command of a capable leader, and Thomas fit that bill. That, of course, would mean that at the present moment, Thomas was not in Castle Staatz, and that in turn would mean that if ever there was a moment to mount an attack, it was now. Couran had to make contact with his troops, bring them back under control, and order them to assault the castle as soon as possible. He knew that the knowledge he was alive would help bring his allies together in short order, so he rushed back to his encampment as fast as possible.

“Lord Couran! You’re all right!” Robinson shouted as Couran strode back into his headquarters. By this point the rain had passed, vanishing as the darkness had.

“I see you are unharmed as well, Robinson,” said Couran.

“Indeed. I cannot tell you how relieved I am to see you safe, Your Lordship. I

must admit I feared the worst, but I rallied our troops and drove the attackers off in the hopes you would return to us.”

“So you *were* the one who turned the situation around? I can always count on you, Robinson.”

“You honor me with your words, Your Lordship. May I presume this is the man who saved you from your plight?” asked Robinson, turning to Ben. He was standing at Couran’s side, but Pham, it seemed, had vanished.

“Yes, though there was another as well. I have to assume he would rather not draw attention to himself, being a spy by trade.”

“A spy...” said Robinson. “Could these be the Shadows that Lord Ars has spoken of?”

“They are, and they’ve lived up to their reputation on this day,” Couran confirmed.

“We owe a great deal to Lord Ars, don’t we? I’ve lost track of how many times he’s pulled us from peril.”

“Very true. He’s brought together a remarkable group of retainers,” Couran agreed. He was beyond impressed that Ars had not only seen the attack coming, but had also dispatched Pham and Ben to prevent the worst. “But this is no time to talk—we must make haste! Let us gather our forces and march on Castle Staatz at once!”

“You mean right now, Your Lordship? But the attack has only just passed, and the men are still shaken!”

“The attack has only just passed, and that is why now is our moment. I believe that Thomas was among our attackers, and if he’s outside the castle walls, he won’t be able to help coordinate their defense. Without his guiding hand, the

enemy will have to respond off the cuff, and Lumeire will have a higher chance of success in his own surprise attack.”

“I see. But what of the men? How do we calm them down?”

“I’ll handle that,” said Couran, who then called over one of his mages and had them cast Hyper Voice upon him.

His words now amplified to many times their normal volume, Couran delivered a powerful speech to his men. He proclaimed that the enemy had made a terrible mistake, and that in their error they had granted their foes the ultimate chance to seize Castle Staatz. Couran knew very well that nothing calmed an army down more than hearing their general declare that victory was certain, and the knowledge that Couran was alive and that they’d been granted a chance to strike back raised his soldiers’ spirits dramatically.

“That’s one problem dealt with,” said Couran. “Now then—use your sound magic to tell our entire force to move out!”

The mage did just that, casting spell after spell to signal other divisions of Couran’s army who were camped nearby that the time had come. The final battle for Castle Staatz had begun.

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“Couran made it out alive, and is leading his troops toward Castle Staatz.”

I heaved a sigh of relief as Pham reported on his and Ben’s success. I wouldn’t have to face the utter disaster of Couran’s death after all.

“Good work, you two,” I said.

“I hope you remember your promise,” said Pham.

“I do, and I intend to honor it. As of this moment, I declare you and your Shadows retainers of House Louvent.”

“Thanks for that,” said Pham with a nod. Considering I would’ve taken on any member of the Shadows as my retainer at the drop of a hat if given the chance, though, I still felt like I was getting my cake and eating it too. It certainly didn’t feel like I’d rewarded them.

“I’ll introduce you to the rest of the crew when I get the chance,” Pham continued. “No need for secrecy now that we’re with you for the long haul, though I think all of us have better things to do at this particular moment.”

“Understood.”

As things stood, Pham and Ben were the only members of his crew I’d met. I didn’t even know how many of them there were, and I was eager to get the details, but like Pham said, this wasn’t the right time. Couran had started advancing on Castle Staatz, and from what I’d heard, he was moving fast. I had to report to Lumeire and get our own offensive rolling as soon as possible. I found him and explained the situation without a moment’s delay.

“I’d expect no less from Lord Couran. He’s not one to hesitate at times like these,” said Lumeire when I’d finished my explanation.

“Thomas sure brought this one on himself by taking personal command of the ambush! Moving quickly was the right idea. It’s the best way to take advantage of the situation,” said Mireille with an approving nod.

“If Lord Couran’s attack has begun, then it’s time for us to enact our side of the plan as well,” said Lumeire. “We’ll stage our surprise attack on Castle Staatz at once. Prepare to march!”

At Lumeire's command, our troop geared up at a rapid pace and began to advance on the castle. We'd be coming at it from the northwest, and moved as fast as we could while still remaining inconspicuous enough to not catch the enemy's attention. That effort proved a success, and we arrived at the staging grounds for our attack without alerting anyone.

As our map had indicated, the northwestern wall of the castle was located at the top of an incline. Even if we managed to break through it, climbing the slope would take a fair deal of time. By the time we arrived, though, the assault on the main gate had already begun, and we could hear the sounds of a pitched battle even from a great distance away. The bulk of the enemy's forces were sure to be occupied at the gates, though I still wasn't convinced that the circumstances would allow our surprise attack to succeed.

"The time has come, my men!" said Lumeire. "Lord Couran's force has already engaged the enemy, and we must follow his example without delay! We shall break through the curtain walls and storm the castle!"

At that, Lumeire's mages began making their preparations. Charlotte would be casting using large catalyzers, three of which had been in stock at Castle Rolto. We'd filled all three of them with aqua magia in advance, so really, all we had to do to prepare for the attack was set them up with a clear line of fire to the wall.

Since explosive aqua magia was in such short supply, we'd decided that only our most capable mage would be entrusted with the spellcasting on this mission. That, of course, meant the task fell to Charlotte. She stood before one of the catalyzers, chanted an invocation, and unleashed a powerful explosive spell that flew through the air and detonated prior to impacting the castle walls, intercepted midair by an invisible barrier. That, surely, was the enemy's

defensive magic at work, and it had prevented us from breaking through the walls in a single shot.

I guess nobody expected Castle Staatz's defenses to fall so easily.

"Hmph," Charlotte grunted with frustration at the fortress's sturdiness. "Next!" she called, moving over to the next catalyzer in line. The first blast she'd fired had expended all the aqua magia in the catalyzer, but she still had two more to go. We'd be in trouble if she used up all three catalyzers' worth of aqua magia without managing to blow a hole in a wall, so a group of nearby soldiers was already hard at work refilling the first catalyzer just in case we wound up needing it again.

Charlotte fired off a second blast, but the barrier remained as sturdy as ever. With two explosive charges unleashed, I had to assume the enemy was aware that they were under attack from an unexpected direction. We had to bring that wall down in a hurry, or we'd be in trouble.

Her third shot crashed through the barrier and impacted against the wall, sending fractures racing through it but not quite bringing it down.

"All right, one more shot!" Charlotte shouted, rushing back to her first catalyzer. That final spell did the trick, and a segment of Castle Staatz's outer wall crumbled.

"Good! The Maitraw Company will take the vanguard, and the rest of us will follow in their wake!" shouted Lumeire.

"Understood," said Clamant. When we planned our assault on the castle, it had been decided that once the wall collapsed, he and his mercenaries would be the first ones to charge in.

The vanguard was an important role, but it was also a dangerous one. I'd half

expected a mercenary like him to refuse the assignment, but to my surprise, when Lumeire asked if he would be willing, Clamant had agreed without question. I'd been led to believe that Couran was compensating him very well for his efforts, and as a result, he responded to requests with near absolute obedience—though I assumed that would only last for as long as his contract did.

Clamant gathered up his men and led them in a charge up the slope and toward the broken section of the wall. Its collapse had sent the enemy running toward our position, of course, but perhaps because this line of attack was so far out of their expectations they had no magic, traps, or even boulders to roll down the hill at us on hand. Clamant, being the mighty warrior he was, took the lead as he and his mercenaries plowed into the enemy line, scattering what little attempt at a defense they'd managed to put up.

“We follow! Charge!” Lumeire shouted when it became clear that Clamant and his men had the upper hand. Unlike Clamant, Lumeire and I would be holding up the rear of our formation and would be the last into the castle. Since the entire army would be charging in, waiting around outside the walls without a guard might've been even more dangerous than exposing ourselves to the perils of battle. We didn't have a choice, and I knew that meant that if worst came to worst, I would be forced to take up my sword and fight for my life.

I was, to be totally honest, not much of a fighter. Unless I was up against a very green soldier, I doubted I'd be able to put up a fight at all. Part of me was regretting not staying behind in Castle Rolto, though it was far too late to backpedal now. Rosell was just off to my side, and judging by the way he was trembling, I had a feeling he was thinking along the same lines I was.

Perhaps thanks to Clamant's efforts, the battle seemed to be proceeding smoothly. More and more of our men made it up the hill and charged into the

castle. Rietz had led the second group of troops up the hill, and Mireille the third, with the soldiers they led being our most capable fighters. After Clamant cleared the way inside, his job was to open up the castle's main gate, while Rietz's and Mireille's squads would eliminate all the mages they could find.

The castle was vast, but we'd brought plenty of soldiers along with us and could cover a lot of ground. Between our strength in numbers and Clamant, Rietz, and Mireille's efficient command, I had a feeling we'd be able to pull this off. In fact, the moment I saw Clamant rush into the castle like its defenders weren't even there, I got the feeling that we had better odds of victory than I'd given us credit for.

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Rietz and Mireille led their troops through the gap in the castle wall, intent upon eliminating all the mages they could get their hands on. Mages were important when it came to fighting a defensive battle. They could protect the castle using defensive magic, set off large-scale traps scattered throughout the battlefield, and send massive magical blasts into the enemy lines. Their versatility was hard to overstate, and that made their elimination as early into a battle as possible key.

"Of course, since they're so important, they're not gonna keep 'em out in the open on a pedestal," said Mireille. "Finding them all on our own would be a pain, so I say we get our hands on an enemy and have them take us to the mages."

"You're planning on torturing them?" asked Rietz.

“Got a problem with that?”

“Not especially. I was just wondering whether we’ll find an enemy who’s willing to talk.”

“Good question. I mean, nobody likes getting hurt and there’s bound to be *somebody* around who can’t handle the fear of it all. The real coin flip’s whether that person has any information worth sharing.”

“Then I suppose we’ll have to capture someone who looks like they’ll have valuable information...and we’ll want to do it as soon as possible. Will this really let us find the mages in time?”

“We’ll have to make it work, one way or another.”

For lack of a better plan, they settled on Mireille’s first impulse.

“Let’s split up,” said Mireille. “I’ll take the right side, and you can search over on the left.”

“Understood,” replied Rietz. The two of them parted ways and got to work searching for a potential informant to coerce.

Castle Staatz was a walled city. The central keep towered over the surrounding houses, in which most of the castle’s citizens lived. Those citizens had by and large barricaded themselves into their homes the moment the attack began, and nobody was walking around outside in the city streets as Rietz advanced through them, wondering how he could find someone with useful information.

I’ll never get anywhere searching at random, Rietz thought. *One of the garrison’s officers would know what we need... Could I find a unit of soldiers standing by in the city, ambush them, and question their commander, perhaps?*

More than half of Castle Staatz’s soldiers were occupied by the defense of the

front gate, and some of them were standing by behind it to repel the enemy if they did happen to break through. Some soldiers were assigned to the defense of the main keep as well, and Rietz imagined that there would also be some soldiers stationed throughout the castle town to deal with any enemies that slipped inside in a surprise attack like Rietz and his men had. They clearly hadn't been expecting an attack of that nature and had therefore assigned less capable soldiers to those duties. The ease with which Clamant cut through the initial wave of defenders was proof enough of that.

Rietz led his men through the streets, searching for anyone he might come across. He took great care to stay aware of his surroundings and ensure that he would see the enemy long before they saw him. He was in hostile territory, and they knew the lay of the land far better than he did, which meant he had to be more cautious than ever.

Eventually, Rietz spotted a group of soldiers down the street in front of him. The invasion had put them into a confused panic, and none of them seemed to know what to do. They weren't experienced fighters, that much was for certain, and Rietz's group had the good fortune to come across them while they were facing the opposite direction. A chance like this wouldn't come twice, and Rietz ordered his men to charge.

By the time the soldiers realized that Rietz was there, he and his men were already upon them.

"It's the enemy!" the squad's commander shouted, but he wasn't much more capable than the rest of his men. In a flash, the squad was decimated and their commander apprehended and bound by Rietz.

Well, I suppose there's no getting around this. Torture's not my strong suit, but I'll just have to get it done, Rietz thought to himself as he stepped up to the

man.

“I-I’ll never talk! Betraying my lord would be a stain upon my good name!” shouted the commander, who was trembling.

“There should be a number of facilities in this castle manned and operated by your most capable mages,” said Rietz. “Tell me where they are.”

“I won’t! I mean...I can’t! Nobody ever told me about those, or if they did, I forgot about it!”

“Just so you know,” said Rietz with a sharp glare, “if you *don’t* tell me everything you know, this is going to end *very* painfully for you.”

“W-Wait!” the commander shrieked. “I’m being serious! I honestly don’t know! I’ve got a brick for a brain, and my memory’s terrible!”

Rietz had to admit that he believed the man. He didn’t have any concrete proof the man was telling the truth, but he also didn’t have any time to waste on a captive who had no information to give him. In the end, Rietz decided to go with his gut, give up on the interrogation, and find someone else. He left the commander tied up in the street and moved on to search another section of the city.

Soon, Rietz’s squad’s fortunes were turned on their head: they were the victims of an ambush as a group of enemies fell upon them from their flank. Rietz was prepared, though, issuing calm, decisive orders and rallying his men back into formation. Their composure recovered, they slew one soldier after the next, but these ones were putting up much more of a fight than the last squad had. They were skilled enough that Rietz was shocked they’d been assigned to the rearguard. It was a close fight, but it was soon disrupted as a voice rang out, cutting through the tumult.

“That’s enough! Halt, fiends!” cried a brawny but short young man as he stepped forward. He held a spear in his hand, and one of his cheeks sported a scar. He looked like he was somewhere around the age of fifteen—quite young, all things considered.

“You seem tough,” the boy said as he gestured toward Rietz. “I challenge you to single combat! Beat me, and I’ll do anything you tell me to!”

Rietz was taken aback. It was such a sudden development that for a moment he just stood there, staring at his would-be foe and judging how likely it was that this was the setup to some sort of trap. The boy didn’t look like the sort of person to hatch schemes, but Rietz knew very well how much trouble one could wind up in judging a book by its cover.

“And if I win...ah, I know,” the boy continued. “You’ll become my henchman! I don’t care a whit about you being a Malkan—if you’re as tough as you look, I’d be glad to take you under my wing!”

“Do you know what ‘single combat’ means?” Rietz sighed. “Duels of this nature are fought to the death. I won’t be becoming anything if you win, much less your henchman.”

Such was the custom in the Summerforth Empire: a battlefield duel was assumed by default to be a duel to the death. Surrendering or offering your opponent mercy was considered flagrant and improper. It was an old custom, though, and one that some warriors were known to flout in the modern day.

“Oh. Really?” said the boy. “Well, okay, then we’ll make this fight an exception! Let’s say we do our best not to kill each other, and if one of us does die, we’ll, uh, figure that out when we get there!”

This was clearly not a man who knew how to take no for an answer. Rietz

hesitated for a moment. He could tell from the brief engagement he'd had with the boy and his fellows that they were shockingly skilled for rearguard soldiers—elites, even. If he chose to refuse and carry on the battle he knew his side might lose, and even if they won it would use up a considerable chunk of time he couldn't spare. There was no guarantee he would win the duel, but at the very least, it would take less time than a drawn-out battle.

There was still the danger he was playing into his enemy's hands, of course, but Rietz just couldn't see his foe as the plotting type. For one thing, until the boy with the spear—who Rietz assumed was their commanding officer—had stopped the battle, Rietz's side had been fighting at a disadvantage. Rietz had brought his troops back together after the initial shock of the ambush, yes, but that hadn't changed the fact that they were on the defensive. If victory was the boy's highest priority, he could've just kept fighting. There was no need for an elaborate plan.

Rietz was starting to understand why a squad as tough as them had been assigned back here, rather than up in the army's vanguard. If their leader was the sort of person to call off a surprise attack to ask for a duel, he was not someone who could be trusted to make the snap judgment calls that a commander at the front of an army had to be capable of. Even if Rietz had the wrong read on the situation and it was a trap, he'd just have to deal with it. He took a moment to imagine how the rest of the enemy squad would attack in such an instance, then looked back at the boy.

"All right. I accept your challenge," said Rietz, stepping forward. "First, though, a question. There should be a number of important locations manned by mages in this castle. Are you aware of them?"

Since the boy had said he'd do anything if Rietz won, Rietz had decided to ask

him for the information he needed. There was a very real chance he'd forgotten all about the castle's defenses, like the commanding officer from before, but it seemed worth a try.

"Huh? Uhhh, you mean the barrier stations? Yeah, I know those," said the boy. "I know where the mage who's supposed to activate the gateway trap is standing by, too. Oh, and the one who's supposed to burn the town down if things start looking sour. Don't think that guy would set his off even if the battle did go south, though. Can you imagine how nasty it'd be if the town caught fire now?"

Happily enough, Rietz's pessimism was unwarranted. The boy had information, and quite a lot of it, for that matter.

"If I win, I'll have you tell me all those locations."

"Wh-What?! Those are high-order military secrets! Even I know how much trouble I'd be in if I leaked those to the enemy...but I also don't care, because it doesn't matter! After all, I'm the strongest fighter in all of Summerforth, and I'll *never* lose!" the boy boasted. He was brimming with confidence, and though he was a simpleton, Rietz didn't doubt for a second that he had the ability to back up his big talk. A wave of tension washed over Rietz as he raised his halberd to a ready position.

"My name is Braham Joe, and I'm the toughest troublemaker in Castle Staatz!" declared the boy, head held high with prideful confidence.

Part of Rietz wanted to question why Braham would take pride in being a troublemaker, but he soon thought better of it.

"You can call me Rietz Muses," he said, not bothering to declare the title he'd been given. Using it himself made him feel like a braggart, and he'd never been

all that fond of the moniker his fellow soldiers had given him.

Their pre-duel formalities out of the way, the two warriors squared off and stared each other down. Finally, the duel began as Braham charged forward, thrusting his spear without so much as bothering to throw in a feint beforehand. Braham was faster than Rietz had anticipated, but the attack was so simple and predictable that Rietz dodged it with ease.

However, Braham's thrust was followed by a second, and then a third, each coming out as fast as the first, so dodging was all that Rietz could do, and the chance to deliver a counter eluded him. He was barely avoiding the attacks, as well—Braham's spear nicked his cheek and his arm, drawing blood. It seemed the boy was aiming for Rietz's vitals, even though he'd proposed a nonlethal duel. Apparently, he'd forgotten the arrangement, and was now going in for the kill with a bloodthirsty fervor. If he had been trying to end the fight without killing Rietz, he would've been trying to disarm him rather than disembowel him.

Rietz could tell that the fight would end poorly if he didn't shake things up, and soon. To start, he tried to gain some distance from his foe by taking two big steps backward. Braham followed without hesitation, trying to once again move in and close the gap, but as he did so, Rietz brought his halberd down, swinging for Braham's spear in an attempt to knock it out of his hands. Braham must've known on an instinctual level that he couldn't take a strike like that, so he pulled back at the last second, retreating without attempting to block it.

That was Rietz's chance for a counterattack. He swung his halberd again without delay, raining blows upon Braham. The rapid nature of his strikes led to them being less powerful than his first attack, and Braham was able to parry them with his spear, but even a weak attack by Rietz's standards was still

crushingly heavy. Each attack sent a numbing pain racing through Braham's arms, and he couldn't find any opportunities to mount a counterattack.

Rietz thought for a moment that he could press the advantage and bring the duel to an end, but he'd misjudged Braham's incredible athleticism. The boy dodged past Rietz's next attack instead of parrying it and thrust his spear forward once more, aiming to send it straight through Rietz's cranium. Rietz just barely managed to twist out of its way, then fell back a few steps once more.

"You really are as tough as I thought. This is getting fun!" exclaimed Braham with an almost childishly innocent grin.

As someone who'd never found anything fun about crossing swords, Rietz couldn't relate. He just saw Braham as dangerous.

"All right, here comes my best move!" Braham shouted with glee, taking several steps backward, charging at Rietz, and then jumping into the air, higher than a human being had any right to leap. He plummeted toward Rietz, spear pointed downward in an attempt to run him straight through.

"Dragon Spear!" he roared. Apparently, he'd named the attack.

It was a flashy move, and if it had landed, it would've had enough power to pierce Rietz's armor. It was also, however, yet another direct, straightforward attack that Rietz dodged by stepping to the side. Braham plowed into the street, embedding his spear deep into the brick road.

"I-It's stuck!" Braham bellowed as he tugged on the spear. "Hey, you! Why'd you dodge, you coward?!"

"W-Well, umm...I'm rather confused as to why you thought I wouldn't," said Rietz, who was so blown away by his foe's stupidity it took him a moment to collect his thoughts.

“In any case,” Rietz continued as he held his halberd’s blade to Braham’s throat, “I believe I can declare victory now.”

“Wh-Why you... A-Are you really okay with winning like this?! Does cheating your way to victory like a coward satisfy you?!” he said with a sharp glare. He almost made it sound like Rietz had swindled him.

“You have no one to blame for this but yourself,” Rietz sighed. “And, as promised, I’ll be having that information from you now. You *do* intend to keep your promise, I trust? I can’t think of anything more cowardly than going back on your word.”

“Ugh...” Braham grunted, clenching his teeth with frustration. Eventually, he resigned himself to his fate and told Rietz everything he knew about the castle’s magical defenses.

○

While Rietz was gathering information in his own particular way, Mireille was obtaining the same information in hers. She had also gone into town in an effort to find and entrap a less than competent squad of enemies, and had also managed to capture one of their leaders.

“All right, pal, I’ve got some questions for you! Hope you’re in a sharing mood,” said Mireille. “What do you know about Castle Staatz’s magical defenses?”

“Y-You expect me to tell you?! My lips are sealed!” said the enemy commander. He looked like he was in his early twenties—young enough that Mireille had suspected for a moment that he wouldn’t know anything at all.

Judging by his reaction, though, she'd hit the jackpot.

"You're shaking a little too hard to play tough on me. I feel for you, honestly, but war's war and I can't show mercy here. Nothing personal, okay?"

"Agh!" the man yelped as Mireille flashed him a grin and prepared to begin her interrogation. She was just about to start out quick and easy by tearing off a few fingernails when the man spoke up again. "S-Stop, please! I'll talk! I'll talk, just stop!"

"What, already?" said Mireille. "I mean, that makes my life easier, don't get me wrong, but wow, you're pathetic."

The man grimaced with a whimper, and Mireille smiled.

"Okay then, it's time for you to give us the grand tour! Lead us to the nearest magical installation, and we'll handle the rest."

The man gave Mireille a listless nod, then set off, hands still bound as he led her and her men away.

o

After clearing a path into the castle walls, Clamant and his men began working toward their next objective: opening up the front gates from the inside. First, though, they needed to verify where those gates were. That was something that even the local noncombatants would know, so he dragged the information out of a townsman who was sheltering in their home. After that, he and his crew set out to do some reconnaissance, scoping out the gate and getting a grasp on its current state of affairs. In doing so, they learned that getting the gate open was going to be quite the trial.

“The whole area’s packed with soldiers. We’re gonna have a hard time fighting our way through all of ‘em,” said one of Clamant’s scouts. That was no surprise, really. Couran was making a show out of his attempt to breach the gates, so it stood to reason that the bulk of the enemy’s troops would be present in the vicinity. Even if the Maitraw Company were to storm in without warning and catch the enemy soldiers off guard, getting the gate open would still be a herculean task.

“No sense trying to do the impossible...but doing nothing would drag our company’s name through the dirt,” Clamant muttered to himself as he considered his options. Just then, his gaze fell on a nearby tower. There were two tall towers in Castle Staatz, and mages were firing off spells from the top ramparts of each. Clamant assumed they were casting explosive spells at Couran’s army beyond the gates. “They must have a sizable stockpile of explosive aqua magia in there... Hmm. We can make use of that.”

Clamant settled on a plan. If he could seize control of the towers, he would seize their aqua magia in the process. Using it, in turn, would allow him to bring down the gate by force, and maybe the surrounding walls while he was at it. The magical barrier defending the walls was, after all, located outside of them, and would almost certainly do nothing to stop a spell cast from within. If their spellcraft was elaborate enough to account for that eventuality, he’d just have to wait until Rietz and Mireille disabled the castle’s magical defenses.

There were, of course, two towers, and if he only took one there was a chance that the other would fire upon it, bringing the tower and Clamant down together. As such, he ordered his company to split up into two teams and claim both towers at once.

“You’re in charge of the B-team, Ryde,” Clamant said to his vice captain.

“Head for the farther tower and clear it out.”

“Got it, Boss,” said Ryde.

With that, the Maitraw Company split up and sped off toward their respective towers.

○

The last few soldiers in our division made their way past the walls and into the castle grounds, which I found littered with the corpses of enemy soldiers. I was getting used to sights like these, but I hadn't exactly learned to enjoy them, to say the least. Every corpse I came across drove in the feeling that someday, I might end up meeting the same fate. It was a terrifying thought, but I couldn't afford to stand around shivering in fear.

Reports soon came in from Rietz's, Mireille's, and Clamant's squads. They'd all gone in ahead of us, and from the sound of things their missions were going well. Only the Maitraw Company was having difficulties—it seemed that opening the front gate had proven unfeasible, so they'd pivoted to occupying a couple of nearby towers first. It felt like a more effective plan than just getting the gate open, so I approved of their judgment. At the rate things were going, we'd have the castle's magical defenses down in no time at all, and the towers would give us an even greater tactical advantage.

The enemy, of course, wasn't just going to give up all those objectives without a fight.

“The forces that were guarding the central keep are on the move and attempting to disrupt our advance!” reported one of our scouts.

The forces who were defending the gate were too occupied by Couran's assault to deal with us, but the area around the inner keep had yet to turn into a battlefield, and the enemy had decided that the units guarding it would be better used elsewhere. They hadn't sent away all of their guards, of course, and the amount they were sending out felt like too little. I found myself wondering if Thomas's absence had crippled their ability to make snap decisions.

"The additional hostile forces are prioritizing the towers that the Maitraw Company has chosen to target," the scout added. That struck me as a natural choice. If those towers fell, it would be a disastrous loss for them.

Rosell, who had been listening in to the scout's report, turned toward Lumeire and said, "I think we should back up the Maitraw Company. If the enemy's sending more men their way, they'll need our help."

"I agree," said Lumeire without hesitation. "Occupying those towers will grant us a major advantage as well. We'll move out at once!"

We hurried through the city streets, doing our best to arrive in time to cut off the enemy's advance. The towers were tall enough that we could see our destination without difficulty, but this being our first time in Castle Staatz, none of us knew the quickest route to reach them. As a result, the trip took much longer than I would've liked. Our foes, on the other hand, knew which roads to travel to reach the towers as fast as possible, and ended up arriving far sooner than we did. As we finally reached the tower's base, I worried for a moment that we'd been too late, but then I sighted the Maitraw Company, still fighting a pitched battle by the tower's entryway. We'd made it in time, albeit just barely.

"Mages, forward!" shouted Lumeire.

"On it!" replied Charlotte, who'd come along with our unit. She was using a small catalyzer, since the large ones would've been way too hard to haul into

the castle, but for these circumstances, that was more than sufficient firepower. We had dozens of mages with us, Charlotte included, and all of them unleashed their spells simultaneously, raining death down upon our foes. Our enemies had no idea we were coming and were caught off guard, unable to do anything to protect themselves. Their formation crumbled in a matter of seconds.

“Charge!” Lumeire commanded, leading our infantry toward the enemy. I thought that we would wipe them out with ease, considering that their chain of command was in shambles, but I’d forgotten that these were the troops who’d been assigned to guard the most important part of the castle. They were the cream of the crop, and not only did they put up a fight, but they actually began turning the tide.

For a moment, I thought we were in trouble. As skilled as our foes were, though, they still had the Maitraw Company to deal with, and their two units had them flanked. If they gave us too much of their attention, they wouldn’t be able to ward off Clamant and his men, who were just as skilled as our foes. It was an unenviable situation they’d found themselves in, and for all their expertise, we were picking off one soldier after another. Even then, they refused to surrender. I had to commend their resolve, in a sense—the battle wasn’t over until we’d finished them off.

We’d managed to defeat the reinforcements who’d been sent to the tower, and thanks to our inadvertent surprise attack, we’d done so surprisingly smoothly. In spite of our achievements, however, I was nervous just to be present on a battlefield.

I really hope things keep going this well, and everyone gets out of this okay.

“The help’s appreciated,” Clamant said when he and Lumeire crossed paths. I

got the feeling he'd been in a pretty dicey position before we'd shown up. "We need to take over this tower before more of them arrive, but the place is packed full of magical traps. Getting up top hasn't been easy. We have a few people who know how to disarm that sort of trap in our band, but they all went to deal with the other tower, so nobody here can get us through them."

That got my attention, seeing as I had two people under my command who specialized in that sort of work: Pham and Ben. Both of them had come along on this operation, but I knew that Pham had drawn quite a bit of attention to himself back when he saved Couran, and my understanding was that he was trying to keep a low profile today, even as he fought by our side. He was keeping his distance, backing us up with magic and a bow.

Ben, on the other hand, had joined up with the main force and was playing the part of an ordinary soldier. His commonplace appearance and fighting style meant that even if he did make a major difference on the battlefield, nobody would take much note of him. I was starting to appreciate that his characteristic lack of characteristics was a much more useful trait to have than I'd initially thought. In any case, since Pham didn't want to take center stage, I decided to ask Ben if he could disarm the traps.

"I have someone who's experienced in dealing with magical traps. I'll see if he can handle it," I said, then called over Ben and asked him to take on the task. Ben agreed with a simple nod and walked right into the tower.

A few minutes later, he emerged and stated, "Mission accomplished."

I was shocked by how quickly he'd pulled it off, but I shook off the surprise and went over to Clamant.

"It's done, apparently."

“That was fast. Good, though. We’ll storm the tower right away. You lot should wait outside and defend this position. Oh, and I’d recommend sending some men over to back up the other tower, just in case.”

With that, Clamant led the charge into the tower. We took his advice, splitting our force and sending men to support the Maitraw mercenaries fighting to take over the other tower. Those of us who remained in our current position set up a defensive perimeter around the tower and waited to repel any additional reinforcements who might show up.

In the end, that extra layer of defense proved unnecessary and Clamant’s crew took over the tower without issue. With the magical traps gone, a few mages were all that was left to defend the place. From the sound of it, it hadn’t even been a fight at all. A short while after the tower was claimed, Rietz and Mireille reported in to say that they’d taken out the mages who were maintaining the castle’s magical defenses, bringing the barrier down in the area around the front gates.

“There’s nothing to stop us from bringing down the walls with a magical blast...and I suppose we should leave that task to Charlotte, shouldn’t we?” proposed Lumeire.

“That sounds like a good idea to me,” I said. “None of the Maitraw Company’s people are better mages than her.”

I’d taken the time to appraise their most skilled mage a little while beforehand, and Charlotte’s stats had put his to shame.

Lumeire ordered Clamant to hold off on casting any spells, since Charlotte would be along to do it herself. Lumeire, Rosell, and I ended up climbing the tower with her, just so we could see the walls come down in person. It was a tall tower, and just climbing it proved to be a bit of a trial, but we somehow

managed to reach the top, where we found a somewhat oddly-shaped catalyzer. Most of them were spherical, but this one looked more like some sort of tube.

“Well, this thing’s pretty weird. Where’s the mage who was using it?” asked Charlotte, glancing at Clamant.

“Dead,” Clamant grunted.

“Well, that’s a damn waste. Mages don’t grow on trees, y’know? Try not killing the next one if you can get away with it,” Charlotte scolded. This was one of the very rare occasions when she was in the right, and Clamant couldn’t muster a counterargument.

Charlotte started fiddling with the catalyzer and preparing it for use. The look on her face wasn’t very confident, though.

“Hmm... I guess this’ll do it, probably? I *think* it’s aimed at the wall, but if it’s not, well, not my fault,” she muttered, inspiring no confidence in me whatsoever that this was going to go well.

“W-Wait,” I said, “if you’re not positive it’s aimed right, maybe we should just leave it—”

“Meh! Here goes!” Charlotte grunted, then started chanting her spell.

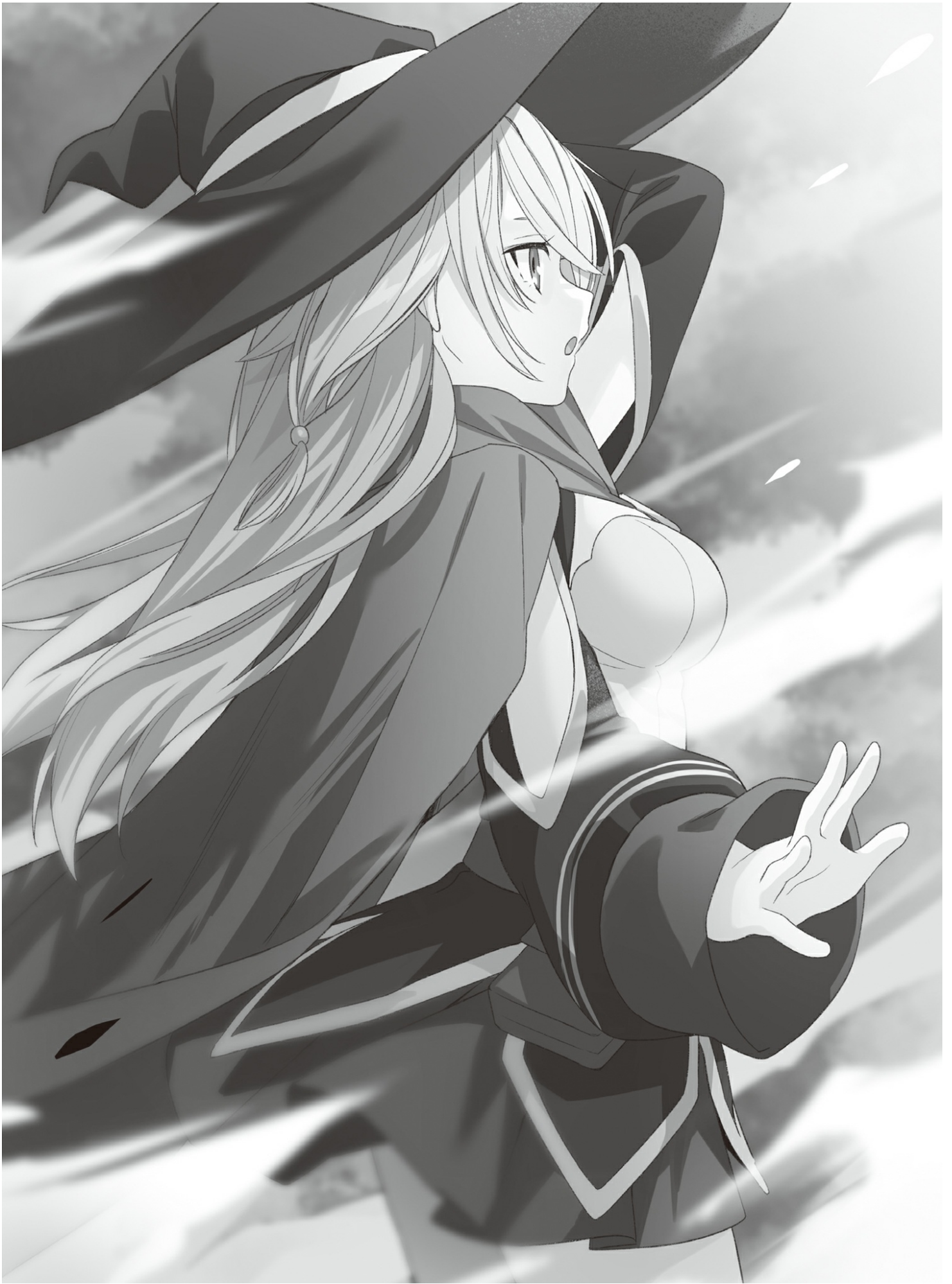
I tried to stop her, I *really* did, but once Charlotte started casting there was nothing you could do to drag her attention away from her magic. We were now in a dangerous situation. In the worst case, the whole tower could be vaporized! I was so terrified that I found myself hunched over on the ground, my arms wrapped around my head...but then, a few moments later, I heard an explosion far off in the distance.

“Oh, hey! That worked out!”

I stood back up to look out at the castle walls, and sure enough, one of them had just suffered a direct hit from her spell. That single shot had been enough to blow away an entire segment of the wall, opening up a hole for Couran's army to charge through. These weren't just any walls, either—they'd been designed to withstand magical blasts even if their protective barrier was broken through, so the fact that Charlotte had brought them down in one shot told a terrifying tale of how potent her magic really was.

"All right! Let's try that again!" Charlotte exclaimed, then cast several more incantations, bringing down one segment of the wall after another.

"W-Wait a minute, you're going overboard! That's enough!" I shouted. We were going to have to repair those walls, and the more she decimated them the harder that task would be. Practically speaking, Couran's army had plenty of points of entry already, so I had her stop before she went too far with her magical demolition work. We'd gone about it in a manner pretty much unrecognizable from our original plan, but still, we'd neutralized Castle Staatz's outer walls.



We spent some time up on the tower after the walls fell, using its vantage point to get a handle on the overall state of the battle. At first, it didn't seem like the tide was turning in Couran's favor. The enemy's morale was high, and they fought to prevent Couran's men from breaking through and entering the castle proper. Gradually, though, the defender's forces were overwhelmed by Couran's superior numbers, and before long his men broke through the enemy line and streamed into the castle town's streets. The enemy troops seemed to realize they were being beaten back, and began to retreat and regroup, abandoning the castle town in an effort to bolster the defenses of the central keep.

"Hey, see those guys who're retreating? Shouldn't I blast them, or something?" asked Charlotte.

On the one hand she had a point, but on the other hand, they were retreating through the streets of the castle town. Launching explosive magic at them would damage the town as well, and this was a city that somebody on our side would have to rule over after the battle was finished. Blowing up a local neighborhood while its residents were sheltering in their homes sounded like a fantastic way to earn the loathing of the local populace, and I wasn't interested in sabotaging the rule of whoever ended up in power here. That was the sort of move that started peasant uprisings!

Whittling away at the enemy's troops was all well and good, but we were already at an advantage even without the use of magical explosives, so I decided not to go with her suggestion.

"No, don't," I said. "We're here to take over this city, not blow it up."

"I wasn't gonna blow it up, though," said Charlotte. "I can keep my spells in check!"

“You can? Really?”

“Dunno. I mean, I *probably* can, but I might screw it up.”

“Then don’t. That’s not a gamble I’m willing to take.”

She doesn’t hesitate to commit to dangerous ideas, does she?

“If you’re finished, we should decide on our next move,” said Lumeire. “Perhaps assaulting the enemy with explosive magic is off the table, but we ought to be doing *something*. We’re not accomplishing anything by standing here.”

Lumeire had a point, in my mind, but Rosell had other ideas.

“Actually, I think we’d be better off staying in the tower for now,” he said. “Our troops would be in trouble if the enemy managed to reclaim it. They’re fighting a losing battle right now, so there’s a real possibility that they wouldn’t hesitate to level the city and us with it if they had the chance. I believe that staying here and guarding this tower would be the best use of our time.”

Lumeire nodded in understanding. It seemed that he was convinced by Rosell’s explanation, while I was astonished by just how much Rosell had grown over the course of the war. When the conflict began he’d been a fearful little kid, jumping at shadows and too scared to speak his mind without stammering through every other word. Recently, though, he’d started acting more assertive. It felt like he’d developed some real self-confidence.

We took Rosell’s advice and spent a period of time holding our position by the tower and guarding it against any potential invaders. Just as Rosell predicted, a group of enemy soldiers eventually launched an attack to reclaim the building. A battle broke out, but since the enemies had just been defeated by and fled from Couran’s main force, they were exhausted and unable to fight their best.

As soon as it became clear they wouldn't be able to reclaim the tower, they gave up and resumed their retreat toward the central keep. Rosell's strategy had been right on the money. If we hadn't stuck around to defend the tower, it was almost certain that enemy soldiers would've taken it back and raised hell.

Before long, Couran's forces reached the base of the tower. There wouldn't be any danger of it falling into enemy hands now that it was behind our front line, so we descended to ground level and joined forces with the main army. Couran wasn't commanding from the front lines, though, so we weren't able to make contact with him just yet. We ended up marching on the central keep with the rest of Couran's army. To his credit, his troops seemed very disciplined and made no attempts to enter the civilians' homes or do any looting and pillaging.

"Retreat!" a voice soon cried out ahead of us. I could tell that it wasn't one of our men, but that just left me confused. Where were they planning on retreating to? Had they decided that Castle Staatz was a lost cause, and resolved to flee through the north gate and fall back to Castle Velshdt? It didn't seem like an unreasonable call to make. There was very little hope left that they could turn this battle around, so if they'd decided to give up on the castle, I'd have to give them credit for their pragmatism.

It wasn't long before we reached the central keep, where we found nobody left to halt our advance. As I'd assumed, it seemed the enemy had concluded that they couldn't hold us off and had fled for their lives. In spite of my initial apprehensions, we'd done it: the battle was over, and Castle Staatz was ours.

We moved into the central keep and began a search of its interior. There was a chance that the enemy had left traps behind, so Pham, Ben, and some other soldiers who were experienced with disarming traps went in first. In the end,

though, they determined that there weren't any traps to speak of, and I soon realized why: Rietz and Mireille had not only taken out the mages who were keeping up the castle's barrier, but they had also disabled the facility that controlled the castle's various magical traps.

The Count of Velshdt and Thomas were nowhere to be found. I assumed that they'd fled with their army. On the other hand, the Baron of Staatz, Stefan, had remained behind in the castle. We sent troops in pursuit of their army, but they proved quite capable at running away, and our men weren't able to do very much damage to their force as they retreated. Some enemy troops remained within the castle town, but most of those surrendered in short order.

With that, Castle Staatz had fallen under our control.



Chapter 3:

Victory

“My men—today, we have achieved an overwhelming victory over our foes! Some of us have fallen, but their sacrifices have won us Castle Staatz and brought us a pivotal step toward our ultimate goal! Your valiant deeds this day shall never be forgotten!”

Following our victory, Couran gathered his entire army to deliver a congratulatory speech. Our previous battles had been relatively bloodless for our troops, but this time, we’d suffered considerable losses. The force that Couran had sent to assault the castle’s main gate had done so under heavy fire, physical and magical alike. A few thousand men had died in total, but considering the scale of Couran’s army, that was within their expectations.

“That being said, we must not let ourselves rest easy just yet!” Couran continued. “This castle’s fortifications were damaged, so Staatz is all but defenseless! I would like nothing more than to allow all of us to indulge in celebration, but for the time being, we must prioritize makeshift repairs to bring the castle back up to a defensible state. The time to make merry will come, I assure you, but until it does, I ask that all of you devote yourselves to protecting that which we have won!”

A celebratory banquet seemed to be a tradition after a successful battle, but apparently, it was a tradition we’d be postponing this time around. I couldn’t fault Couran’s judgment on the matter. With the walls in their current state, a raiding party could’ve waltzed in and caught us off guard with ease. Since our pursuit of the enemy army had been unsuccessful, they still had plenty of troops available who would be watching like hawks for their chance to strike back and reclaim the castle by any means necessary.

As long as we stayed vigilant, though, I didn't think we had to worry about being driven out of the castle. I didn't expect our foes to launch an all or nothing attack on us unless we made ourselves into a target too inviting to pass up. As Couran said, it seemed our best bet was to tighten our defenses and work on bringing the walls back up to a defensible state. We'd really done a number on them this time, however, so it wouldn't be as easy as it sounded.

We had to get the walls patched together before we marched on Velshdt, but the coldest point of winter was also almost upon us, and the odds of heavy snowfall were high. We'd have to wait around for winter to pass before moving on one way or another, so in a sense, this was the perfect timing to have a project like the walls holding us up.

Soon after his speech, Couran sent for me.

"Once again, I find that I owe you a great deal for your efforts in this battle," he said when I arrived. "We would never have breached the city walls if it weren't for the surprise attack you orchestrated, and I may not have lived to see this day had your Shadows not delivered me from mortal peril. You have my gratitude, now and always."

"I'm honored, Your Lordship," I replied with a bow.

"I intend to reward you and the others whose contributions to this victory stand out, of course, but that is not why I've called you here. No, you see, I would like to make use of your appraisal ability."

"It would be my pleasure."

"We have a rather large number of prisoners this time, so I expect it will be a tiresome process, but know that your efforts are appreciated."

There are more prisoners than usual? Interesting.

I had to assume that larger, fiercer fights meant more captives at the end of the day. He was right about it being tiresome, as well. Using my skill too much always exhausted me, and while it had been some time since I'd abused it in that manner, I got the feeling I'd be put through the wringer today.

I was led to the prison where we were keeping our captives, and quickly began appraising them one by one. The more important prisoners were kept in single cells, while the rank and file foot soldiers were penned up in shared chambers, but the one trait that their living conditions shared was that they were all, well, awful. Maybe that was a given, considering it was a prison.

I soon came to realize that Couran hadn't been kidding about the number of captives. It seemed there were a few hundred people locked up in the castle's prison. The scale of the battle and the sheer number of soldiers taken captive was one factor, but there was also the fact that many of the soldiers who'd fought in this battle were loyal to the Count of Velshdt or the Baron of Staatz, and would never so much as consider betraying them to side with Couran.

As expected, appraising everyone gave me a killer case of eyestrain. Eventually, I decided that handling all of them in one day was a lost cause, so I resolved to finish the task over the next day or two. I handled seventy people on the first day, among whom I found a surprising number of talented individuals. Considering the scale of the battle, it made sense that they'd fielded their most capable soldiers, and it made sense in turn that some of them had ended up as our prisoners.

On the second day, I upped my game and appraised ninety more prisoners. Among them, I found someone quite remarkable whose stats averaged out to eighty, a warrior with a Valor of ninety, and a middle-aged man with a current Intelligence of fifty-seven, but an Intelligence cap of ninety-four. A real late

bloomer, that last one.

I was very much in the market for a new retainer, and hoped that one of the people I'd found would want to join me, but so far none of them had been interested in serving a new lord. Considering their former positions, I had a feeling I'd have to prepare a pretty juicy offer to coax them into serving me, and being the petty noble I was, I didn't have the resources to make that kind of commitment.

I still had around eighty people to appraise at the end of day two, and decided to handle them the next day. Day three rolled around, and I'd just appraised my fiftieth man without finding anyone special. As I moved on to the fifty-first, though, a shout rang out.

"Hey, you! Shrimp! Lemme outta here!"

I glanced in the direction the voice had come from...and saw a man—or rather, a boy, given his small stature. Small enough that I had to wonder where he got off calling me a shrimp, even. He was barely taller than I was, and he had the face of a rambunctious little punk. I could only assume he was still a teenager, and I wondered for a moment why we had a child locked up in prison, but then I noticed his muscles and understood. He was very well-built, and looked like he could hold his own in a fight. I decided to appraise him.

Braham Joe
Age: 17
Male
Status:
LEA: 50/102
VAL: 91/92
INT: 9/61
POL: 5/55
Ambition: 88
Aptitudes:
Infantry: S
Cavalry: A
Archer: B
Mage: D
Fortification: C
Weaponry: D
Naval: D
Aerial: D
Strategy: D

Calling his stats unbalanced would've been putting it *very* lightly. His Valor was incredible, and his Leadership score had the potential to be better. Thinking back, I was pretty sure I'd never seen anyone with a Leadership cap that high before. His current Intelligence, however, was 9. That was *appallingly* low. Low enough to make me wonder if he could function on a basic level. Could you even live a proper day-to-day life with an Intelligence that low?

An Intelligence of nine meant that even with his outstanding Valor, I could imagine him losing a duel on account of his stupidity alone. His maximum

Intelligence wasn't that bad, though. If I could just get him to study up, I knew he could at least be as smart as an average person. In fact, while his current stats reflected some serious, deal-breaking weak points, his maximum stats made it clear that he had the potential to be an exceptional commander slumbering within him.

I decided to take a closer look at the description beneath his stat block, which read: Born on the third day of the third month, 194 Imperial Era, in Staatz, County of Velshdt, Duchy of Missian, Summerforth Empire. Parents have passed away. A simple-minded man with a taste for meat. Enjoys fighting, and has an interest in women who are young and tough. Harbors a grudge against his lord, Stefan.

His parents were dead, and he had no siblings, meaning he was all alone in spite of his youth. The part about him harboring a grudge against his lord caught my attention as well, considering that only the soldiers who had refused to betray said lord were locked up in this prison. If he didn't feel any loyalty to Stefan, then why hadn't he jumped ship and agreed to fight for Couran instead? His Ambition was high, so for a moment I thought he just wasn't the sort of person who'd be willing to serve a lord at all...but if that were the case, he wouldn't have agreed to serve Stefan either. My curiosity was piqued.

"Hey! What're you staring at me like that for? Trying to pick a fight? 'Cause if you are, I'm game!" said Braham, casting a glare my way.

He couldn't have sounded more like a small-time hooligan if he'd tried. I'd seen my fair share of battlefields, though, and toughened up as a result, so his attitude wasn't enough to shake me. I was still very curious as to why someone with an axe to grind against their lord would've turned Couran down, so I decided to see if I could coax an explanation out of him.

“Why did you refuse to enter Lord Couran’s service?” I asked. “You knew that would get you locked up down here, so what was the point?”

“Huh? I turned it down ‘cause I didn’t want to,” said Braham.

“Yes, but why?”

“I didn’t want to ‘cause I didn’t want to! You won’t catch me serving some shriveled-up old fogey.”

So it’s an issue of age? He has some sort of bias against middle-aged men, and doesn’t want to serve one?

“Most old folks like him are as thickheaded as the day is long,” Braham continued. “Stefan was an old guy, and he was the same way. You can show people like them how tough you are, and they’ll still treat you like useless dirt!”

He was certainly tough, yes, but Braham’s current Intelligence was low enough that I had my doubts about whether he’d be of any use. I had to give his former lord credit for making the right call. It seemed, then, that he’d refused to work for Couran because he assumed he’d be treated as poorly working under him as he’d been treated by Stefan. I had to admit that he was right—I couldn’t imagine Couran assigning someone like him to a position of any importance. With the right education, however, he had the potential to be a general known far and wide. His high Ambition meant that he’d be a tough one to control...but at the very least, it seemed worth making an attempt.

“Lord Couran isn’t the sort of person who’d treat a capable warrior poorly,” I explained. “Why not at least give working for him a try?”

“Nope, I’m not buying it. Look, I don’t think I’m cut out for all this serving someone garbage in the first place, okay? I’d rather gather up my own band, take out a castle somewhere, and declare independence, thanks.”

Now that was a reckless ambition if I'd ever heard one.

"That won't happen," I said, "because you'll be dead before you can even try. You know they're going to execute everyone who refuses to serve Lord Couran, don't you?"

"They can try. I'll slip outta this jail before they get the chance."

Braham had the eyes of a man with absolute faith in his own immortality. I couldn't judge whether there was any basis to his confidence, but I could tell that he, at least, believed everything he said from the bottom of his heart.

"Who're you supposed to be, anyway?" Braham asked. "What's a little squirt like you doing in a prison?"

"My name is Ars Louvent. I'm the baron of a small territory that you probably haven't heard of."

"Hmm. A lord, at your age? Lemme guess—you're here 'cause Couran needed someone to come convince me to sign on as one of his men, right?"

"No, not at all. I came here to judge whether any of our prisoners had talents worth making use of. It's a skill of mine."

"Oh, so that's how you figured out how tough I am? You're not kidding about that skill of yours!" exclaimed Braham, his irate scowl shifting into an elated grin. He certainly was a straightforward person. "I'll be honest with you, pal. There's one more reason why I couldn't sign on under the guy," he continued. It seemed putting him in a good mood had done a lot to loosen his lips. "It's the duel I fought that got me locked up in here, see. The coward cheated his way to a win! A loss is a loss, so I went along with his demands, but I'll *never* serve somebody who'd fight dirty like that rat bastard!"

Somebody cheated to beat him in a duel?

It sounded absurd, but then again, there weren't all that many people out there who could beat a man of Braham's skill in a fair fight. Considering what a blockhead he was, it was easy to imagine that he'd gotten caught up in somebody's scheme.

"Damn that Malkan," Braham muttered. "I'll repay him one of these days..."

Wait, did he say "Malkan"? Is he talking about Rietz?

I'd never noticed any other Malkan in our army, so I couldn't imagine he was referring to anyone else. Would Rietz fight dirty in a duel, though? I...couldn't deny that it was a possibility. He would've been in a hurry at the time, and if he thought that catching his foe in a trap would get him through the duel quicker than fighting fair, I could see him resorting to trickery.

"That son of a whore! I used my ultimate technique, and, uh...got my spear stuck in the ground...and then he *dared* to put his blade to my neck while I tried to pull it out! A real warrior would've waited! Why would someone as tough as him resort to dirty tricks, anyway?"

I reassessed my opinion: Braham had brought every bit of his loss upon himself. Of course putting yourself in that vulnerable position would result in your defeat. In any case, it seemed that Braham was under the impression that he hadn't really lost to Rietz, and didn't deserve to get locked up. I was starting to form a plan: what if I had him fight Rietz again, under the condition that Braham would enter our service if Rietz beat him? I could have them duel with wooden weapons to make sure nobody got hurt. It seemed worth a shot, so I decided to bring up the possibility.

"I'm acquainted with the Malkan you're talking about," I said.

"Seriously? He called himself Rietz Muses—you're sure that's the guy?"

“Well, now I’m positive.”

It seemed Rietz had introduced himself, which cleared up what little ambiguity that remained.

“He happens to be one of my retainers.”

“What? He’s one of your people?!” yelled Braham. “I-In that case, you’ve gotta help me out here! I have to get a rematch with him! Last time didn’t prove anything, and I’ve gotta settle the score!”

Well, that makes this easier.

I hadn’t expected him to ask me to put together a fight, but I wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth.

“I can do that, but I have one condition,” I said.

“What?” asked Braham.

“If you lose to Rietz, I want you to stop being stubborn and fight on our side.”

“Lose the duel, lose my freedom, huh...? Sure, fine by me. If I win, though, I want you to let me go.”

He wants to stake his release on the duel?

I wasn’t sure if that was a promise I could make. On the other hand, he might’ve asked for the fight, but I was the one who’d turned it into a gamble. It was only fair for him to have something to gain from victory.

Then again, I definitely don’t have the authority to just release him... I’ll have to ask Couran for permission.

“One more thing. If I lose, I’ll serve you, not Couran. I’d sooner rot in jail than work for that geezer.”

“But you’d work for me?” I asked, a little taken aback. It was a proposal that I couldn’t complain about...for the most part. He had incredible potential, but at the moment, I had to admit he seemed like a major troublemaker. I wasn’t confident that I was capable of giving him the education he needed. “I trust you’re aware that I’m a child? And you’d serve me anyway?”

“I mean, I’d rather work for someone who’s tough enough to make me acknowledge them, but you’ve got an eye for people, at least. That gives you a leg up on all my other options. Not that any of this matters, since I’m gonna beat Rietz into the dirt.”

Braham was as confident as ever, but personally, I had a hard time imagining Rietz losing to him. The kid’s lack of brains offset his excess of brawn, after all. I had faith that Rietz would win the day...and that thought led me to another realization: if Braham ended up becoming one of my retainers, I could just ask Rietz to teach him everything he needed to know! I’d gotten the impression that Braham was the sort of guy who’d listen to people as long as they were capable of beating him up, so it seemed like a perfect solution.

“I’ll have to run the conditions for the duel past Lord Couran before I accept, but I suspect he’ll be open to them,” I said. “I’ll be back as soon as I’ve spoken with him.”

“Well, hurry it up, then!” Braham snapped.

Unfortunately for him, I still had prisoners to appraise before I could leave. Braham kept grumbling along the lines of “What are you waiting for? Get going!” all the while, but I kept up with my appraisals and found a few capable people in the process, though nobody who stood head and shoulders above the rest of the crowd.

After I finished, I left the jail and went out to meet with Couran.

“I’ve finished my appraisals.”

“Good work,” replied Couran.

To start, I handed over a list of all the talented prisoners I’d found over the course of my search. Then, I explained the Braham situation to him.

“So he’s to serve you should he lose the duel, and walk free should he win?” said Couran. “Braham Joe...not a name I’m familiar with. You say he possesses outstanding talent?”

“Yes, though his talents are still underdeveloped at the moment,” I replied. “With the right training and education, I’m certain he’ll be an outstanding general.”

“Hmm... And why is it that he wishes to serve you, rather than me?” Couran asked.

I had a feeling that being upfront about Braham’s reasons would only cause problems, so I decided to phrase my explanation a little more diplomatically than he would’ve.

“It seems that his previous lord treated him rather poorly, and he’s concerned that you would neglect him in a similar manner. You have so many people in your service already, he feels his needs would fall by the wayside.”

“Hmm,” said Couran. “If he’s as capable as you say, I’d be more than willing to reward him accordingly, but so be it. The question is, are you inclined to take this man into your service?”

Now that I’d thought up the idea of having Rietz train him, I’d come around to the idea.

“Yes.”

“In that case, I see no reason not to accept his conditions. After all, those who serve you serve me by extension. I don’t feel the need to have every talented soldier in my realm act under my direct supervision. I have confidence you will raise him to his full potential.”

Having gained the permission I’d been hoping for, I said my thanks to Couran and went on my way. Rietz would want to know about his rematch with Braham in advance, so speaking to him was my next objective. I had a feeling he’d be amiable to the idea, but there was always the possibility something would compel him to refuse, and I wanted to be on the safe side. I tracked him down and broached the topic.

“Braham? O-Oh, yes...I remember him. He was quite capable, but, well...he had some sizable flaws in his fighting style,” said Rietz. He remembered Braham, at least, though considering how memorable a manner the man had lost in, that almost seemed like a given.

“Would you be all right with fighting him again?”

“I suppose so, but why?” Rietz countered. I explained the situation, and Rietz’s eyes widened. “You’re planning on bringing *him* into the service of House Louvent? A-Are you serious?”

“Absolutely.”

“W-Well...far be it from me to question your judgment when it comes to his talent, I suppose...”

“He has the potential to grow much smarter with the right education. If he does enter my service, I was hoping you would handle that.”

“Excuse me?! I’m going to have to ask you to please reconsider!” Rietz stammered. I’d have to work a bit harder to convince him to help out with

Braham's education, it seemed. I could understand the reluctance. Being Braham's teacher sounded like it would be rather trying.

"Don't worry. I'm pretty sure he'll listen to you as long as you beat him first. It won't be as bad as you're imagining it."

"A-Are you sure about that?" Rietz asked skeptically.

I decided to put off further discussion of Braham's education and focus on the duel itself. To start, I led Rietz to the cell Braham was locked up in. We ended up finding a training ground within the castle, and escorted him there for the duel.

Rietz and Braham stood across from each other, wooden spears in their hands. I'd suggested wooden swords, but apparently, the spear was Braham's weapon of choice. Rietz was capable with either weapon and didn't have a strong preference, so they settled on dueling with spears.

"I've been looking forward to this, Rietz Muses! You won't catch me off guard with your dirty tricks this time!" said Braham.

"'Dirty tricks'...?" Rietz repeated incredulously, then sighed. "You have no one but yourself to blame for what happened last time."

The duel would conclude when one participant dropped their weapon or sustained what would be a fatal wound in a real battle, and a skilled soldier chosen by Couran would serve as the referee. I would've had a hard time judging the match, so I was grateful to have someone who knew what they were doing to handle the task. The referee was a stern-faced man with a beard. He looked like a serious sort and had a Valor score of 75, which put him on the higher end of the spectrum.

"This will be a one round match," said the referee. "Should Rietz Muses win,

Braham Joe shall enter the service of Lord Ars Louvent. Should Braham Joe win, he will earn his freedom and be allowed to leave this place unmolested. En garde!”

Rietz and Braham raised their spears, standing at the ready.

“Begin!” shouted the referee.

Braham launched himself forward that very instant at a tremendous speed. For a second I panicked, thinking it would end then and there, but Rietz evaded the thrust without batting an eyelash. I couldn’t tell if he’d predicted the attack or if he’d just reacted to it on the spot, but I *could* tell that Braham had wagered the whole duel on that single attack. His eyes widened in shock as Rietz dodged out of the way, and Rietz took the opportunity to thrust his own spear at Braham, stopping it just before its point slammed into his throat.

“Rietz Muses is victorious!” declared the referee.

The duel had been far shorter than I’d expected. Braham had been planning on ending the match before it even began, which I had to admit was a decent plan for someone with an Intelligence score like his.

“Dammit,” spat Braham. “How the hell’d you dodge that...?”

“You had a decent plan,” said Rietz, “but I could tell you were going to come at me right away by the look in your eyes when we faced off. If I hadn’t figured that out, though, I might not have been able to dodge your attack.”

As expected, Rietz had predicted Braham’s line of attack in advance. He made dodging it look easy, but considering its speed, I could believe it would’ve given him trouble if he hadn’t seen it coming, no matter how good he was.

“Ugh! Dammit, really? I let it show on my face...?” Braham grunted as he scowled and clenched his fists. “I admit it. I lost... As promised, I’ll work for the

pipsqueak from now on.”

“Incorrect,” said Rietz. “You will work for *Lord Ars Louvent* from now on.”

“Ah... Right, sure. I’ll work for Ars.”

“*Lord Ars*,” Rietz repeated. He was smiling, but it was one of those mirthless smiles that told you that you were in big trouble. Rietz’s expression could exude some serious pressure when he wanted it to.

For all his protests, Rietz wasn’t one to turn down my orders, and I got the feeling that he was already carrying out my command to oversee Braham’s education. Braham, for his part, behaved exactly as I’d expected and obeyed the command of the man who’d just defeated him, repeating “*Lord Ars*,” without further prompting.



I was starting to get the feeling that Rietz would be able to give Braham the education he needed without any issues, which was a very good thing considering that thanks to Rietz's victory, Braham was now officially my newest retainer.

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Kanses, the Count of Velshdt, sat with Thomas and his various retainers in the Castle Velshdt Chamber of Debate. A council of war had been called, and the expressions of every last attendant were grim. The battle of Castle Staatz had been lost, robbing them of a vital stronghold and incurring a heavy toll in terms of casualties.

The loss of Castle Staatz was a painful—one might even say fatal—blow. With Staatz in enemy hands, Vasmarque would no longer be capable of sending reinforcements to Velshdt. Considering the fact that the forces left in Velshdt had been driven so far into a corner that Vasmarque's reinforcements were their only hope to turn things around, that was a very big problem. It seemed the fall of the county was all but inevitable, and none present could come up with a plan to remedy the situation.

The long, gloomy silence was broken by one of Kanses's retainers.

"I believe it is time we consider surrender," he said.

All of his fellows were thinking the same thing. If they fought to the bitter end, their count would surely be killed before the struggle was over. Were they to give up now, however, they could demand that Kanses be spared as a condition of their surrender. He would not be able to keep his position as count,

of course, but the likelihood of him being killed would at least be lowered.

In the eyes of Kanes's followers and advisors, resistance would bring about nothing but needless bloodshed. Kanes's capitulation would be beneficial to Couran and his army as well, so they were very likely to accept it without question. When Kanes's retainer suggested surrender, in short, he had done so out of a desire to preserve his lord and master's life.

"Never," said Kanes with a pained scowl. "I will *never* surrender."

Kanes was the brother-in-law of Vasmarque, and he held him and his capabilities in the highest of esteem. He could never have brought himself to give up Vasmarque's cause just to save his own life.

"Lord Kanes, please," the retainer spoke up once more. "You know what must be done! You need only give the word!"

"We could never bear to lose you, Your Lordship! And that's not all—at this rate, House Bandle itself may fall! Would you have your son suffer the consequences of this war?!" said another. "My family has served the Bandles for generations, Lord Kanes. I beg of you, do not let it all be for nothing..."

Kanes's followers' pleas grew more and more desperate as they appealed to their lord, and their words did not fall on deaf ears. While Kanes valued his loyalty more than his own life, his son's life was a different matter altogether. His resolve began to waver, and for the first time, he began considering the prospect of surrender.

That was when Thomas chose to open his mouth.

"I do not believe we have run *entirely* out of options. Not yet," he said.

All eyes turned to Thomas. Some gazed at him with looks of hope in their eyes, while others frowned, as if to chastise him for butting in when they were

so very close to convincing their lord to see reason.

“Have you come up with a plan?” asked Kanes.

“Not one that would assure victory... But in the best-case scenario, it may allow us to reclaim Castle Staatz,” said Thomas. The room broke out in hushed whispers.

“Castle Staatz is guarded by a host more than twice the size of our own,” said Kanes. “How could we possibly reclaim it?”

Thomas began to describe his plan. As his frank, detached speech went on, the whispers in the room grew louder and less reserved, turning into shouts. It was a preposterously reckless proposal, and yet nobody could deny that with Thomas there to guide its course, it just might have a chance at success.

“If this operation fails, I would like you to surrender, Your Lordship,” said Thomas as he looked Kanes in the eye. “Your life still has too much value for us to throw it away here.”

Kanes hesitated for just a moment, then nodded in agreement. Thomas waited for that confirmation, then left the room, off to prepare for his final, last-ditch effort to turn the tides of the war.

o

The cold set in soon after Castle Staatz fell, and we ended up riding out the dead of winter in the castle itself. We eventually finished repairing the curtain walls, and when that work was finished, Couran granted us the rest of the winter to rest and recuperate. The castle wasn't large enough to host the entire army, though, so many of his soldiers found themselves camping outside the

walls, and I found myself worrying about how restful a break like that could even be.

I, in contrast, had been granted a room to stay within the castle. It was far more spacious than I had any need for, so I invited my retainers to share the room with me and spend their winter in relative comfort—especially after we set up a heater powered by flame magistones.

One morning, I felt a shaking sensation as a voice roused me from my slumber.

“Wake up, Lord Ars! Wake up!”

That voice... Must be Charlotte, right...?

If so, this was a rarity. Charlotte was such a heavy sleeper that it usually fell to me or Rietz to make sure she managed to haul herself out of bed in time for breakfast.

“Well, that’s something,” I mumbled as I sat up. “You managed to wake up on your own today?”

“Who cares! Come outside, hurry!”

Charlotte grabbed my hand, pulled me out of bed, and dragged me out the door without missing a beat. I had no idea what she was thinking, but in my half-asleep daze I was powerless to resist.

The moment we stepped outside, an intense chill washed over me. Our heater kept it nice and toasty inside, but it was downright frigid out there. It was probably the coldest weather I’d experienced since I was reborn in this world, and the fact that I’d stepped outside without bothering to change out of my bed clothes made it all the worse.

“F-Freezing! N-Need a coat!” I said, my teeth chattering.

“Look, look! Out there!” Charlotte shouted excitedly, pointing toward the castle garden and ignoring me.

I looked out, still confused, and found myself face to face with a sea of white. Snow had fallen, blanketing the garden in a thick layer of powder. It was the first snow of the year, and it took me until that moment to remember that Charlotte loved the snow so much, she flew into an ecstatic frenzy every year when it fell for the first time. She really did act just like a kid sometimes. I didn’t mind looking out over a snowscape myself, but it was way too cold at the moment for me to appreciate the sight. In fact, looking at all that snow just made me feel colder!

“I love it when it snows! Come on, let’s run around in it!” said Charlotte.

That was my cue to dig in my heels.

“W-Wait! I’ll freeze to death if I go out dressed like this! At least let me put on something warm first!”

“Oh, right. You *are* dressed pretty lightly... Why’d you go outside wearing that? Of course you’d be cold.”

“Whose fault do you think this is?”

“Well, go on, then! Hurry up and get changed! I’ll be waiting out in the garden!”

I shook my head with exasperation as I made my way back inside and changed into something a little more seasonable. I was tempted to just go back to bed for a moment, but going along with their follower’s requests sometimes was part of a lord’s duties. I braved the cold once more and made my way to the garden, where I found Charlotte already hard at play in the snow with a few other youths. The first snow of the year had her even more wildly out of control

than usual.

“Ah, Lord Ars! What took you so long?” Charlotte shouted as I approached. “We were just deciding what we’d build out of snow today! Come help!”

I spent quite some time outside, playing around in the snow at Charlotte’s behest. We made all sorts of sculptures—cats, dogs, and the like, though I had a feeling nobody would manage to guess what they were supposed to be unless we told them first. I was a little worried they’d think we were making heretical idols to some occult deity.

“I’m getting hungry. Think I’ll go find something to eat,” Charlotte eventually said, then wandered off into the castle. I didn’t think I’d ever meet anyone as free-spirited as she was.

I was also getting pretty hungry, having not eaten anything since she dragged me out of bed, so I followed along after her to try to find some breakfast. I thought that I’d get to take it easy afterward, but no sooner had I finished eating than Charlotte dragged me right back outside again. Rietz and Rosell came along too this time, and we ended up engaging in a wintertime activity that Charlotte had taught us a few winters back: a snowball fight.

It started out quiet enough, but it wasn’t long before we started attracting the interest of the passersby. First a few people joined in, then a few more, and before I knew it the garden had descended into a full-blown snowball war. These were real soldiers who’d been fighting in a real war up until just recently, too, so the way they conducted their snow warfare was intense, to say the least. I was too exhausted to take part in that, so I retired to observe from the sidelines with Mireille, who’d opted out from the very beginning.

“They’re all sure taking it easy, huh?” Mireille muttered. “They think this whole war’s in the bag, I’d bet.”

“I can’t say you’re wrong about that...but we do hold a nearly insurmountable advantage, don’t you think?”

“True enough. But I know my brother, and I know that’s not enough to make him give up. He might be cooking up another of his usual tricks right now, and if he is, we can’t let our guards down.”

Her brother—that is to say, Thomas Grunzeon. His first attempt on Couran’s life had failed, but that wasn’t to say there wouldn’t be a second. Mireille had a point, and we couldn’t let ourselves get complacent, but one little detail kept me from giving her too much credit for her prudence.

“If we can’t afford to let our guards down, then why’re you already drinking?”

“What? A girl’s gotta have her liquor! We could be scheduled to fight an all-out battle tomorrow, and I’d still get a few cups in here and there.”

I shook my head and sighed.

What could be more complacent than drowning in a bottle first thing in the morning?

o

A few days later, Ben paid me a visit.

“The boss wants to talk with you,” he said. “Mind coming with me for a bit?”

“He wants to talk with me?” I repeated, a little puzzled. I didn’t have anything in particular to do at the moment, though, and I didn’t have a problem with the idea, so I decided to play along. “Sure, I suppose. I can come.”

“Great. Follow me, then.”

Ben led me away without bothering to explain what Pham wanted. I figured that either he didn't know, or he'd just forgotten to mention it to me. I'd learn when I got to Pham regardless, so I didn't bother prying and just followed along.

We walked on for some time, arriving at an abandoned alleyway where I found Pham waiting for me. For once, he wasn't alone. A group of five men and women I'd never seen before were waiting with him.

"You made it," said Pham when he noticed me approaching.

"Oh? He's a lot cuter than I thought he'd be," said a woman who was standing next to him. She had a big smile on a face thick with makeup, and was dressed in a flashy, gaudy outfit. She was also tall for a woman—if I had to guess, I'd say she was around 5'6" or so. I couldn't tell how old she was at all, beyond *maybe* somewhere in the vicinity of her thirties.

There were two other women with Pham, and two men as well, none of whom were wearing anything eye-catching and none of whom left a very strong impression. They seemed closer to Ben's type, though none of them were quite as profoundly plain as him.

"Who are these people?" I asked.

"My people," said Pham. "Since I'm one of your retainers now, I want you to take them into the fold as well. I can't do my best work without them backing me up."

"So these are the rest of the Shadows...? I see now," I said. The flashily-dressed woman aside, all of them did seem suited to spy work. That just made me wonder what her deal was even more.

Pham seemed to catch on to my curiosity.

"This is Lambers, our master of disguise. Dunno if you've appraised him yet or

not, but just so you know, he's a guy underneath all that. Not even I know what he looks like—he usually dresses as a pretty plain man when he meets me, but when he learned he'd be meeting you for the first time today, he decided to go all-out with the crossdressing. Don't ask me why."

"What? Is something wrong with wanting to leave an impression on the man who might be my master from now on?" asked Lambers.

That's a man?

I never would've guessed, and was stunned by the revelation. I'd gone through a similar sort of surprise back when I met Pham, but his crossdressing was enabled by his naturally youthful and feminine appearance, whereas it sounded like Lambers's entire appearance was fabricated from the ground up. Not only did he look the part, he sounded just like a woman as well. I had to wonder how he managed it—could he be using magic?

I gave him an appraisal, just to clear away my doubts, and he was indeed a man. His stats were unexceptional, but his talent for disguises had already impressed me more than a few high abilities could've. Lambers wasn't his real name, by the way. Apparently, he was Andrew Sumage. I was also surprised to find that he'd been born outside of the Summerforth Empire. He didn't sound foreign, so I had to wonder what sort of life he'd led to take him from being born in a foreign country to working as a mercenary in Missian. I was curious, but I knew he wouldn't open up to me just like that, so I decided to ask once we'd gotten to know each other a little better.

I appraised the rest of the Shadows as well, and in doing so found that all of them gave me false names when they introduced themselves. There was a tall man who called himself Mulad, a man with a middling build and gray hair who said his name was Dondo, a woman with distinctively long hair called Remen,

and a woman with a very sharp glare who claimed to be called Shac. All of them had fairly high Valor and Intelligence scores, which led me to conclude that you had to be pretty smart and physically capable to cut it as a spy. Remen and Dondo both had B-ranked Mage Aptitudes, too, which was on the higher side. All of them came from outside of Missian, and I assumed their backgrounds were all rather complicated, given their line of work.

“So? What do you think?” asked Pham. “Feel like taking them on?”

“If making them my retainers will make your work easier, I have no objections to doing so,” I replied. “And even if it wouldn’t, they’re all capable enough that I’d be inclined to recruit them anyway.”

“Good to hear. Thanks,” said Pham.

Everyone went on their way again shortly thereafter without exchanging much in the way of pleasantries. It seemed they’d come here just to meet me, and with that mission accomplished they had no desire to stick around. For my part, I returned to Castle Staatz with a skip in my step, over the moon at having gained a whole host of capable retainers all at once.

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A few weeks passed by, the days grew warmer, and the snow began to melt away. In other words, it was time for us to prepare to once again go out on the march. Our soldiers had spent long enough resting that they’d need a period of training before they were ready to go back into battle, and while they were drilling away in the training grounds, I was participating in council after council as we worked to iron out our plans to take Castle Velshdt.

Ultimately, it was decided that we would besiege the castle. A siege would take time, but there was no way for reinforcements to reach the castle anymore, and Castle Velshdt was just as sturdy and hard to assail as Castle Staatz had been. A siege was the option least likely to bring about needless casualties among our men, so considering the circumstances, it seemed like our best option.

This time around, Couran would not be going out into battle himself. Instead, he would stay behind in Castle Staatz and have his orders sent to us by messenger when necessary. Killing Couran was just about the only hope that our foes had of turning the situation around, and him setting foot outside the castle without reason was just asking for them to try to assassinate him, so he chose to prioritize his own safety for the time being.

Staying in the castle wouldn't mitigate the threat of assassination, of course, and so Couran requested that I lend him the services of the Shadows until Velshdt fell. I got the feeling that Pham and Ben had left quite the impression on him back when they saved his life. That wasn't the sort of request you could just turn down, of course, so I acquiesced right away.

With the Shadows on the job, I knew that the risk of Couran's assassination would be reduced to effectively nothing, and we held an overwhelming advantage over our foes in terms of military might. It felt like our victory was assured, but I couldn't help but feel a nagging hint of doubt that something could go wrong. Mireille's warning that her brother could still have a trick up his sleeve weighed on my mind. What, I wondered, could he do to turn the situation around?

I asked Mireille what sort of plan she'd expect him to use, but she didn't have much in the way of specifics to offer.

“That’s a good question, kiddo, but as things stand, there’s no telling what he might try,” she’d said. “If he wants to make a move, he could go in all sorts of directions. No use trying to predict it.”

“How does a terrible situation like this give him that many options?” I asked, a little confused.

“We’ve got a massive edge on him, sure, but when all’s said and done, we lose the second our leader’s taken out. It’d only take one murder to do us in, and you wouldn’t believe how many ways there are to kill a man. He could fake a surrender to get close to Couran, or pull some trick to lure him back onto the battlefield. Couran knows that, though, so he’ll have his guard as high up as it can go. Honestly, I doubt there’s much of a chance left at this point.”

“So...it really is impossible for them to turn the tides, then? What happened to all that talk about us needing to stay on guard?”

“Well, the thing is, my brother’s the sort of person who comes up with something so off the wall nobody else could ever think it up. He might make up a plan so outlandish, not even I could ever predict it. There’s no way of telling that’s the case until he makes his move, though.”

It was quite something to hear Mireille, of all people, admit that he could think up a plan that was beyond even her. Thomas would have to be an incredible leader to pull that off.

That very same day, a messenger who claimed to bear word from Kanes, the Count of Velshdt, arrived at Castle Staatz. When I heard he’d sent a message, my first assumption was that the count had decided to surrender. Couran must have thought the same, since he allowed the messenger through the castle gates without protest—though *not* without a hefty guard on the alert for any and all trickery. They were exceedingly cautious about the potential for an

assassination attempt, and subjected the messenger to a full-body check. Even when that didn't turn up any hidden weapons, they kept him under close watch and had him meet with Couran's right-hand man Robinson rather than the lord himself.

The messenger and Robinson were to meet in Castle Staatz's great hall. A few other high-ranking nobles were also in attendance, while I stood off to the side, ready to observe the meeting at a distance. Soon, the doors to the great hall opened and the messenger was led inside, flanked by a pair of soldiers who were prepared to take action at the first sign of any funny business.

"My name is Beens Lobans, and I come on behalf of Lord Kanes," said the messenger. He was a middle-aged man with a notable bald spot, and when I appraised him I found that his Leadership and Valor were both quite low—in the thirties—but his Intelligence was at 72, and his Politics at 79, which were notably high. He felt like the quintessential civilian paper-pusher, judging by his stats.

"I am Robinson, representative of Lord Couran. On account of His Lordship having fallen ill, I will receive your message in his place," Robinson lied. I supposed it would be something of a faux pas to admit that Couran wouldn't meet with the messenger out of fear of assassination.

"Very well," said Beens. "Allow me, then, to deliver my message: Lord Kanes requests an armistice."

The assembled lords began whispering to one another. Some of them went so far as to jeer the messenger. Why, after all, would Couran feel inclined to lay down arms now that he held such an overwhelming advantage? I was surprised as well. I'd assumed that the messenger had been sent to declare their surrender and negotiate for terms that would benefit Kanes as much as possible, not offer an armistice that Couran would have no need or desire to

accept.

“An armistice, you say?” said Robinson. “My apologies, but we will not accept such a proposal, regardless of the specifics of your offer. Please be on your way.”

The rest of the assembled lords were in agreement, some already urging the messenger to make himself scarce. Beens, however, spoke up once more and said, “I believe it would be in your best interests to allow me to finish... Velshdt is not as defenseless as you may assume—we still have a secret weapon in reserve.”

A secret weapon?

That was a strange thing for a messenger to say, no matter how you sliced it.

“What, exactly, do you mean by that?” asked Robinson.

“In recent times, Castle Velshdt has been the staging ground for a long-term experiment in magical weapon development. That project has borne fruit in the form of a catalyzer that dwarfs all previous models in scale, capable of reducing a city to ash with a single spell. Were he so inclined, His Lordship could order this very castle to be obliterated in an instant. That being said, I trust you appreciate why he would rather not resort to such methods if at all possible.”

I jumped to the conclusion that he was bluffing. If Kanes could have Couran and this castle blown away at will, he would’ve done it a long time ago.

“That is a lie,” said Robinson, echoing my first impression. “If such a weapon existed, I find it hard to believe we would have heard nothing about it. More to the point, if you have the means to wreak such devastation at your disposal, why have you not done so?”

The other lords muttered in agreement, but Beens didn’t waver.

“The catalyzer in question is capable of bringing about slaughter on an unprecedented scale, and His Lordship does not mean to use it unless provoked. He would not even consider doing so unless he was driven into a corner and left with no other options—in other words, the precise situation he finds himself in now.”

It wasn't an implausible explanation, but it didn't change the fact that this supposed superweapon was impossibly convenient for Kanes's purposes. On the other hand, the fact that we couldn't rule out its existence with absolute certainty meant that this could turn into a major headache, if I was reading the situation right.

Beens kept talking for some time. He was quite the orator, and the lords who had been so convinced he was lying began to waver, their wills shaken by his story. Eventually, Robinson came to the conclusion that letting him continue to influence them would be a poor decision and called the meeting to a preemptive close, ordering his men to escort Beens out of the hall.

“I would like to make it clear to everyone present that what that man said was a bluff, and nothing more,” Robinson said as soon as Beens was gone.

The nobles, however, looked confused and unconvinced. The odds of the mega-catalyzer being a bluff seemed high, but they couldn't help but consider the slight possibility that it was real. Their worries were plain to see.

“He said that Kanes did not wish to destroy a city offhand, and that is believable, yes,” Robinson continued. “However, ask yourself this: if such a weapon was available to Kanes, then why would he not have kept silent on the matter, waited until we began our march toward Castle Velshdt, then used it to obliterate our force wholesale once we were a safe distance from civilization? Surely a weapon that can destroy a city could have decimated our forces,

leaving what few survivors there may have been demoralized and incapable of carrying on the fight. A tactician of Thomas's capabilities would never have missed such an obvious opportunity."

"But Beens already explained that," said one of the lords. "He said that war or not, we're all fellow Missians, and that Kanes didn't want to use a weapon of mass slaughter on his own countrymen! That was the whole point of the armistice!"

"He said that, yes, and you'd be a fool to believe it," said Robinson. "I believe that Kanes may choose to refrain from killing Missian civilians, but he would not hesitate for a second to slay a soldier. Otherwise, he would have laid down arms before the war began in earnest."

Nobody could refute Robinson's argument outright, but it was still clear that they were fretting over the worst-case scenario. This superweapon business was turning into a major pain in the neck already. For all the authority Couran commanded, he couldn't completely ignore the opinions of his vassals, and I got the sense that a lot of them would be arguing in favor of an armistice unless something was done, and fast.

"Hmph," snorted Mireille, who was standing off to my side. She was loud enough that the attention of all the assembled lords turned to her. "It's a bluff, obviously, and if you don't believe me, then listen up! Even if a weapon like that were possible to build, Velshdt doesn't have the resources to pull it off. You'd need to be the duke himself to have access to that sort of wealth! In the unlikely event that Velshdt *was* involved in the development of such a weapon, it would've been at the duke's request. There's just no other way, and in case you need a reminder, Lord Couran is the son of that very duke! Even if the project was kept top-secret, there's no way he wouldn't have heard something

about it, and if he did know that Velshdt had a superweapon on hand, he would've approached this war with a different set of tactics."

The lords seemed at least a little convinced by Mireille's argument, muttering to one another about how she had a point.

"Anyway," Mireille continued. "Seems to me you can just call Lord Couran over, tell him what the messenger had to say, and see what he thinks. I have a feeling he's going to tell you that there's no such thing and that anyone who believed it for a second is an idiot, though."

Getting Couran's judgment on the matter could certainly do a lot to put his followers' worries to rest. His words carried considerable weight, and he had a way of being remarkably persuasive. Considering how many of the assembled lords respected him, that struck me as a great way to resolve the issue. Robinson seemed to agree, and he summoned Couran at once.

As Mireille had predicted, when Couran heard what was going on, he declared that Kanes's supposed superweapon was the stuff of fantasy. Almost none of the lords seemed worried anymore after hearing their leader's reassurances, and Beens was told that no armistice would be accepted, then driven out of the castle. I felt relieved to see that the incident had ended without a hitch, but for some reason Mireille and Rosell were off on the side of the room, engaged in furious discussion with grave expressions on their faces. That piqued my curiosity, so I went over to see what they were going on about.

"What are the two of you discussing?" I asked.

"Hmm? Oh, just how the whole thing with the messenger didn't really make sense. We can't figure out what the actual goal of sending him here was," said Rosell.

“Right,” agreed Mireille with a nod. “There was no way we’d fall for a trick like that, and there’s no way they thought we would for a second. Makes you wonder what they were actually after.”

They had a point. Thomas was supposed to be an exceptional tactician, and it was hard to believe that a bluff like that was the best plan he could come up with. That said, I had a hard time imagining that there was some deep, ultimate objective hidden behind the messenger stunt.

“What if they just sent the messenger because they had nothing to lose? For all we know, they have some other, totally unrelated plan they’re working on at the same time,” I suggested.

“That’s possible, but we’re not so sure,” said Rosell.

“It just feels way too sloppy,” said Mireille. “But, meh, we might be overthinking this. No point obsessing over it when we have this little to go on.”

We spent a while longer discussing possibilities, but we weren’t able to pin down any plausible explanations for the enemy’s behavior. A few days later, though, as our preparations for the attack on Castle Velshdt moved along, a scout we’d sent to scope out the enemy’s movements came rushing back to Staatz with an urgent report. The scout went straight to Couran to deliver the news without so much as pausing to rest, and I decided to follow along and listen in out of curiosity.

“We’ve observed the enemy engaging in peculiar activities, Your Lordship,” the scout reported. “They seem to be readying some sort of massive mechanism, like nothing we’ve ever seen before!”

“They what?” said Couran with a grimace.

The words “massive mechanism” brought to mind the secret weapon Velshdt

was supposedly developing that the messenger had warned us about some days beforehand. For a moment I wondered if his story had been true after all, but then I realized it was just as likely that this new device was an extension of their prior bluff. It could've been anything at all, as long as they could make it look like it was a weapon they were preparing to use on us.

On the other hand, the fact that they were making a show of preparing the supposed weapon meant that an extra dose of caution might be merited. Probing deeper into their activities seemed necessary, just to be on the safe side. There was always the chance our assumptions were wrong and it was as powerful as described, and even if it wasn't capable of leveling a city, it could've still been a lesser but potent weapon.

What's Couran going to say this time?

"It seems very likely that this, too, is a bluff...but as long as we don't know what it is they're doing, my men will fear the possibilities and raising their morale will be a challenge," Couran muttered. "Investigating this so-called weapon will take time, though. Is that what their goal is? To delay our advance? But what would the point of that be? Winter gained them all the time they could have asked for already—how could more of it be of any use to them?"

In spite of his doubts, it seemed Couran was resolved to look into the weapon's true nature. The scout reported that it was being worked on outside of Velshdt's city walls, so it would be possible to probe deeper into the matter, but that would take time. It just didn't make sense—why would time be all they were after? As Couran said, they had little to gain from subjecting us to yet another minor delay.

Maybe they really are developing a weapon, and need just a little more time to make it functional? Hmm...

It didn't seem impossible, but if that was the case, it wouldn't make sense for them to go out of their way to bring the weapon up with us. There were plenty of other ways they could've bought time, after all. What else could they have to gain from this, though? No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't come up with any answers, and since Couran was set on learning more, I decided to wait for additional information to come in and see how things looked then. The Shadows, incidentally, would not be participating in this mission. Couran considered his own protection to be of higher priority, and entrusted the task to a different unit of spies instead.

The spies returned to Staatz just a few days later—much faster than I'd anticipated. I wasn't able to hear their report directly, but after Couran heard what they had to say, he called all of his vassals together to update us on the situation.

“As expected, the so-called weapon our foes have been working on is nothing but a fabrication,” he said. “The enemy's goal was to use it to draw our attention and buy time while they riddled the area with magical traps and bolstered Velshdt's defenses. Had our spies failed in this mission, they would have ended up with ample time to make the battlefield much more dangerous for us and our men.”

So it was just a distraction, then.

Planting the idea of a superweapon in our heads and then making a show of working on something distinctly superweapon-esque was a good way of grabbing our attention and keeping our focus away from the traps they were setting in the meantime.

“We've uncovered the enemy's plot, and while traps will not prevent us from laying siege to Velshdt, they could very well make the process take more time

than I hope to expend. We must march on Velshdt before they have time to complete their preparations, and render this scheme of theirs meaningless!”

So it's finally time for us to move out, then.

With the enemy's objective clear, I had to agree that we had no reason to just sit around and let them get away with it. That said, there was something about the situation that felt subtly off to me. The fact that our spies turned up all that information had to mean that the enemy had screwed up and leaked it to us, in one way or another, but would a master tactician like Thomas really be that careless? Was he the sort of person who'd make a last-second blunder and ruin everything? Even incredible people made mistakes sometimes, sure, but even though I knew I was probably just overthinking it, I decided to ask Mireille what she thought about the matter.

“That seemed suspicious to me too, but Thomas isn't some perfect superhuman or anything,” Mireille said. “He's the sort of person who makes stupid, simple mistakes every once in a while, even if he doesn't look it... Though then again, it's been years since the last time I saw him. Maybe he's grown out of that; who knows. Even taking that into account, it's not impossible that he just screwed up.”

That was a relief to hear. Even if she hadn't seen him recently, she was still his relative, so if she thought that the leak being an honest mistake was possible, I figured I didn't have much to worry about after all.

“The enemy's tactician is my master's little brother...” Rosell muttered to himself. He was standing nearby, deep in thought.

Is there something about this that's bothering him, too?

I watched him mull it over until suddenly, his eyes widened and a look of

understanding dawned on his face. He looked up at me and spoke, his voice wavering.

“I...I think I’ve figured out the enemy’s real plan.”

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And now I just have to wait and see if they take the bait, Thomas thought to himself. His nerves ate away at him as he lurked in the woods with his men. Ambushes were Thomas’s specialty, and he excelled at concealing entire regiments of soldiers in ways no one would ever uncover. Even though his troop was on the larger side, he knew that his foes wouldn’t notice them until it was far too late.

Thomas had brought his troops here in absolute confidence that the enemy army would soon travel along a road that ran just nearby. His confidence wasn’t baseless: he knew they would come because he’d lured them into doing so. He’d sent a messenger and readied a weapon-like apparatus to plant a thought in their minds, then leaked information to make them believe they’d seen through his scheme. The enemy would never imagine he had another plan on top of those, and would surely rush forward to prevent him from laying the traps they assumed his scheme centered around. Now all he had to do was wait and let them walk into his ambush.

Thomas wasn’t sure how many soldiers he’d be able to eliminate in the imminent bloodbath, but by his best estimate, he had a good chance of reducing their numbers enough to turn around the seemingly impossible odds that Velshdt’s defenders faced. He’d put every ounce of thought and care into

the plan he could possibly muster, but still, he had his doubts. There was a chance the enemy would prioritize caution and not show up at all, to start, and even if they did play into his hands, pulling off the ambush was no easy task. Even though it was his signature move, there was every chance this one would end in failure.

Although Thomas was very aware that his plan could fail, at the same time, he was confident that his foes had not seen through it. Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that his own sister had utilized a very similar scheme in a mock battle mere months beforehand.

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“I think our enemy might be trying to pull off a plan like the one my master used in the mock battle right after she came to Lamberg,” said Rosell.

A look of surprise passed across Mireille’s face.

“Now that you mention it, I guess that is possible,” she said. “I think I remember using a routine like that to play pranks a few times, back when we were kids. Maybe he remembered that and used it as inspiration?”

Rosell’s brief explanation was enough to let me catch on to the plan our foes might’ve been carrying out as well. In short, they might have deliberately leaked information to us in order to lure us into a trap. I did indeed remember Mireille using a very similar tactic of layered deception back during one of our mock battles, and seeing as they were siblings, it was plausible that Thomas could come up with a similar scheme.



Rosell went on to explain the specifics of the enemy's plan, as he imagined them. By leaking false information, they would lure us into making a hasty move, catch us in an ambush, inflict heavy casualties on our main fighting force, and do the best they could to even the disparity in numbers. They likely weren't expecting to bring our forces into perfect balance with theirs, but it was reasonable to think they could bring it down to slightly skewed odds rather than the overwhelming advantage we held.

A successful ambush wouldn't win them the war offhand, or even put them at an advantage, but at least it could earn them a fighting chance and open up a path to victory in the long run, especially since it could force Couran to return to the battlefield in person. He could never leave the command of his army in one of his followers' hands if the odds were that close to even, after all.

In any case, if the enemy was allowed to carry their plan out, our hopes of conquering Velshdt with ease would dim. I couldn't say with complete confidence that a sneak attack would be waiting for us, but as long as everyone was aware of the possibility and moved with caution, the odds of the potential attack's success would be dramatically reduced. I shuddered to think what could've been if we hadn't noticed any of this.

I brought Rosell and Mireille to meet with Couran and had Rosell explain his theory.

"I see," said Couran when Rosell was finished. "I must admit, I found it odd myself... The spies I sent have a decent reputation, and I expected much from them, but they still learned too much, too quickly. It seemed unnatural...but if it was all part of the enemy's plan, then it makes perfect sense. I'm not certain beyond a reasonable doubt that your theory is correct, but it is plausible enough to be worthy of consideration. You've done well to bring this to my

attention.”

Rosell fidgeted bashfully, unsure of how to deal with Couran’s praise. Couran went on to question him about the specifics of the theory, asking where he believed the attack would take place. Rosell began to explain, with the aid of a nearby map, that there was a large forest en route to Velshdt that was the perfect place to conceal a division of soldiers.

“They’ll be hiding in the forest, will they?” said Couran. “Is that so... In that case, I imagine burning them out would prove most efficient.”

“I agree,” replied Rosell. “If we set the forest ablaze with fire magic, we could cut the hostile force off in moments.”

“I would prefer to take their tactician Thomas alive, if at all possible. It would pain me to slay a man of his capabilities. Of course, it would be far worse to miss our opportunity and allow him to flee back to Velshdt,” said Couran. He sounded a little conflicted, but eventually came to a decision. “We stand more to gain than lose. Let us burn out the enemy army.”

From that point onward, everything proceeded according to plan. Lumeire was given command of the expedition, and being under his command, I wound up accompanying him. We could’ve sent out spies to verify that there was an ambush waiting for us in the woods, but the enemy was sure to flee if they realized we’d caught on to them, so instead we decided to go on the attack blindly. We’d waste some aqua magia if Rosell’s theory was wrong and nobody was there, but we weren’t at a lack of resources at the moment. The part of me that still remembered what it was like to live in Japan and still held all those old values balked at the thought of burning down a beautiful, verdant forest, and I felt more than a little guilty for enabling such a thing, but it seemed the people of this world didn’t make much of it at all.

We set up several large catalyzers on the outskirts of the woodland we believed the enemy was hiding in. The weather was bright and clear, and it felt a little on the arid side—the perfect weather for burning down a forest. We readied the catalyzers, and once all our preparations were complete, Lumeire raised a hand to signal our mages to cast their magic. They did so in unison, unleashing a powerful spell called Firestorm.

Vortexes of flame issued forth from the catalyzers, plowing into the woods and setting them ablaze. One of the whirling infernos was far larger than the rest, and I assumed Charlotte was responsible for it. It was hard to believe that anyone could've survived a conflagration of that magnitude, and anyone in the woods was probably burned to ash, but there was always a chance that one or two of them would get lucky and make it past the treeline alive. That was why we held position around the woods, keeping a loose perimeter to catch any escapees. We had our soldiers stand far enough away to keep them from getting caught up in the blaze themselves, of course.

We were under express orders to capture Thomas, if he made an appearance, and our whole army had been given a description of what he looked like. That description came courtesy of Couran—I'd thought Mireille would be a better option, but she hadn't seen him in years and claimed to have no idea how he looked these days. She'd been very surprised to learn that he'd grown a beard, so not pitching in was the right call on her part.

I waited a slightly farther distance from the forest and watched as it burned away. I still wasn't sure whether anyone had been hiding in there or not, but if they were, I could only imagine how hellish of a fate they'd met, given how bad it looked from the outside.

Eventually, I noticed a few of our soldiers beginning to move in the distance.

That meant that enemy soldiers had emerged from the woods, and over the next several minutes I bore witness as troops fled for their lives from the forest, only to be finished off by the infantrymen who awaited them. I could barely stand to watch, but as the head of House Louvent, I couldn't let myself show weakness and forced myself to take in every second of the horrid spectacle.

Before long, a victorious shout rang out.

"News, Your Lordship! We've captured Thomas Grunzeon!"

"You have?!" Lumeire shouted back. "Bring him here at once!"

A bald man with a grizzled beard was soon dragged before us, bound tightly with rope. He was tall, burly, and I could see a resemblance between him and Mireille in the shape of his nose and the look of his eyes. It was easy to believe that the two of them were siblings.

"Is this man your brother, Mireille?" asked Lumeire.

"That's him, all right," answered Mireille. "Hey there. Been a while, you little dunce."

Thomas shot Mireille a wordless glare. I could already tell that there was no love lost between the two of them, and while I had him right before me, I decided to give him an appraisal.

Thomas Grunzeon

Age: 27

Male

Status:

LEA: 95/100

VAL: 85/91

INT: 94/94

POL: 80/80

Ambition: 20

Aptitudes:

Infantry: A

Cavalry: S

Archer: A

Mage: C

Fortification: B

Weaponry: D

Naval: D

Aerial: A

Strategy: S

Born on the tenth day of the first month, 183 Imperial Era, in Arcantez, County of Arcantez, Duchy of Missian, Summerforth Empire. Parents have passed away. Has one older sister. Stubborn and bullish, with a fondness for sweets and horseback riding. Enjoys the company of kind women. Feels fierce loyalty toward his lord and master Vasmarque.

His stats were incredible, more than justifying his reputation as a commander and master tactician. He was an even match for Mireille, and in fact, he may have even exceeded her from an overall perspective. I knew that he would be a

powerful ally if we could talk him into siding with Couran, but unfortunately, his loyalty to Vasmarque was as unshakeable as expected. Convincing him to betray his master was no small feat.

All that said, with this one-sided battle wrapped up, it seemed inevitable that Velshdt would fall into our hands. There was no way our foes could turn the tide after this, and the fall of Velshdt would put Vasmarque in an unenviable position. If Couran brought down his brother and seized control of Missian, it seemed possible that Thomas would come around and serve him...as long as Couran didn't earn his eternal enmity by executing Vasmarque, anyway.

With Thomas secured, we made our way back to Castle Staatz to present him to Couran.

"It's been some time, Thomas," Couran said. "Three years, I believe? I was worried this expedition would be the end of you, and I consider it a stroke of good fortune that you've made it out alive."

I didn't get the impression Couran was lying about that. He seemed pleased to see Thomas alive, and I assumed he was hoping to recruit him in the near future.

Thomas seemed to draw the same conclusion I had.

"I won't be working for you, so don't even ask. I serve Lord Vasmarque, and none other," he said, preemptively shutting down Couran's invitation.

"Yes, I thought you'd say that," replied Couran. "However, I also know that you're clever, and I expect you've already realized that Vasmarque stands upon the brink of defeat. If you choose to serve me, I promise you will be treated most favorably."

"No decent man would choose his lord based solely on who can offer him the

greatest rewards,” Thomas spat. I could already tell how stubborn he was.

Couran spent a while longer trying to tempt Thomas to his side, but Thomas staunchly refused. We certainly couldn’t let him go free, so when Couran gave up on his solicitations, he had Thomas locked up in the dungeons.

With that, it was time to prepare for the attack on Velshdt. Our army would march the moment winter came to a close.



Epilogue

The cold of winter faded away, and under Couran's orders, we set out to bring Velshdt under our control. Lumeire was tasked with leading us into battle. It seemed he'd risen further still in Couran's esteem after his success against Thomas's force. Our foes chose to hole up in the castle, while we set up encampments around it and laid siege. Lumeire was thorough, laying out defensive lines so tight that not even a mouse could slip out of the castle unnoticed.

A few days after the siege began, a messenger was dispatched from Velshdt bearing a letter of surrender. This time, the enemy had decided that there was nothing to be done about their situation and resolved to capitulate. That being said, their surrender was not unconditional: Kanes would only submit without a fight if we were willing to guarantee the safety of his vassals and followers. Notably, he did not ask that they be allowed to maintain their former statuses and positions, nor did he make any requests to spare his own life.

Lumeire didn't have the authority to accept the conditions of surrender on his own, so he sent a letter to Couran describing the terms and asking how he should reply. A response soon arrived stating that Couran found the terms acceptable and would be willing to honor them. With that, Velshdt's surrender to our force was accepted, and Lumeire dispatched a messenger to the castle to inform them of our decision.

The messenger communicated our own terms to Velshdt's leadership: we would require them to disarm their troops, deliver all their weapons and aqua magia to our force, and disarm any traps that may have been laid within the castle. Our foes obeyed without protest, and a stock of weaponry so enormous I

couldn't possibly imagine they were holding anything in reserve was soon brought out to us. We were told that the castle had indeed been trapped, but that every one of its defensive mechanisms had been disabled. We couldn't take their word at face value, of course, so we conducted a thorough investigation of the castle and concluded that they were indeed telling the truth before we moved our troops inside and occupied it.

Velshdt was another walled city, and the castle town was immense. It wasn't quite as large as Semplar, the city Couran ruled over, but it dwarfed Canarre in scale. Velshdt, Semplar, and Maasa were known as the three major cities of Missian, so it wasn't any surprise that other settlements would pale in comparison to them.

We marched into the keep and quickly took the nobles into custody. They wouldn't have to fear for their lives, but I still had no idea whether or not they'd be allowed to maintain their noble status. I had a feeling that Couran would ask me to appraise them, and would choose who would and wouldn't get to serve him based on the results, so I decided to give them and their most important retainers an appraisal preemptively. Most of them turned out to be quite capable, though some of them had surprisingly low stats and nobody jumped out to me as exceptional.

Before long, I got my first look at the Count of Velshdt, Kanes. He was an older man, with black hair and a wrinkled face. He looked rather unremarkable at a glance, but there was something about his eyes that gave him an unusual air. His stats, in contrast, were much more ordinary than I'd expected, coming in at an average of around sixty. His Politics score was 80, at least, and he was better off than the average person, but I had expected the count of a city as important as Velshdt to have stats that blew me away. I had to assume his vassals adored him for his virtues rather than his abilities.

With that, Castle Velshdt was under our complete control. Lumeire went out to report to Couran of our success, and before long Couran himself arrived at the castle, escorted by the troop of soldiers that had participated in the siege.

“It was wise of you to surrender, Kanes,” said Couran when the two lords met at last. “However, your wisdom this day does not excuse the foolish decision to refuse my invitation of peace and side with Vasmarque in this conflict. For that, I have no choice but to punish you accordingly.”

Couran’s tone was severe, and Kanes’s followers began to stir as a disquieting energy swept through the hall. They began to bow, one after another, appealing to Couran with their words to spare their lord’s life.

“I did not say I would execute you,” said Couran, addressing Kanes’s followers indirectly, “nor do I intend to. That being said, you will be stripped of your position as the Count of Velshdt. Furthermore, you will be imprisoned until my feud with Vasmarque is settled and Missian has fallen under my control. Only then will you be released, and at that point I will consider granting you territory once more, depending on how you’ve conducted yourself in the meantime.”

The fact that Couran had chosen to spare Kanes’s life made his judgment lenient, and that wasn’t even starting on the potential for him to regain his noble status. I had to agree with Couran’s decision. Had he chosen to execute Kanes, he would have earned the enmity of all of his followers for no good reason. Many of said followers chose to be imprisoned alongside their lord, which further supported my impression that they were extremely loyal to him. Only a very small number of them chose to swear a new oath of fealty to Couran instead.

The sentencing of Kanes marked the final end to the war in Velshdt, and with

that conclusion reached, the time had come to enter a period of post-war cleanup and reorganization. We'd sustained relatively few casualties throughout our campaign, but our provisions and aqua magia reserves had been depleted. Arcantez was still in Vasmarque's hands, but with our resources as strained as they were, Couran ruled that we weren't ready to stage an assault, and so we entered into a lengthy period of preparation.

It would take at least a year for our army to prepare itself for an assault on Arcantez, and in the meantime, we would have to decide what to do with the lands we'd conquered. The counts who had surrendered to Couran's force without a fight would be allowed to keep their titles, but since Velshdt and Samkh had both attempted to resist, they would need new rulers.

It was quickly decided that the new Count of Samkh would be Rupert, the man who we had convinced to surrender and join our cause back at Fort Valdsen. Many of Couran's followers were aiming for a position as count, and plenty of them were incensed when they learned who Couran had chosen. That said, the goal he was trying to accomplish felt worth irritating some of his vassals to me: in short, the theory was that Rupert's elevation to the status of count would prove that those who surrendered to Couran would be treated favorably, which would hopefully encourage others down the line to give up without a fight. A solution that didn't make anyone upset with him would've been ideal, of course, but I had a feeling he'd have some other plan to mollify those he'd offended.

Velshdt, meanwhile, was to be handed over to Lumeire. That was a decision that nobody thought to question. Lumeire's social standing had skyrocketed thanks to the recent rout he'd led. My retainers had come up with the plan, technically, but as our commanding officer, Lumeire was given the bulk of the credit for the mission's success. Lumeire, however, was already the Count of

Canarre, and Canarre and Velshdt were by no means close to one another. Ruling over both would be a challenge, and when asked what would become of the smaller county, Couran made a secondary declaration.

“The position of Count of Canarre shall be entrusted to Ars Louvent!”

Couran had promised that he would raise me to the status of count after the war with Vasmarque concluded. When we made that promise, however, he had not yet decided to claim Velshdt before taking on Vasmarque himself. I had to assume that the change of plans led to his decision to revise our agreement and move up the timeline.

I was expecting the hall to erupt in a cacophony of outrage, but to my surprise, Couran’s announcement was met with a rather mixed reception. I realized that his followers might not have written off all of my retainers’ achievements as Lumeire’s after all. Rather, it seemed they were giving credit where it was due. The fact that Couran had taken every opportunity to praise my achievements in public probably played a part as well. A few of Couran’s followers nonetheless objected on the basis that I was too young, but Couran stood firm and refused to reconsider.

That wasn’t quite the end of the matter, though. There was still one obstacle that stood between me and the position of count: the fact that Lumeire had not immediately accepted the position of Count of Velshdt. He had asked to be given some time to consider the offer, and in light of Lumeire’s distinguished service, Couran had allowed him to do so. Now we just had to wait on his decision.

That night, Lumeire summoned me to his quarters. He wanted to speak with me alone, and I trusted him enough to go along with the request, slipping into

his room without bringing along even a single guard. I found Lumeire sitting with a stern expression on his face.

“Thank you for coming, Ars,” Lumeire said.

“Of course,” I replied. “I’ve come alone, as promised.”

“Please, have a seat.”

I did just that, seating myself in a nearby chair. It was a finely-crafted and comfortable piece of furniture, but I was so nervous I barely even registered how nice it felt to sit on. For some time, Lumeire remained silent. I just sat there, waiting for him to initiate the conversation.

Eventually, Lumeire said, “Canarre has been passed down through my family for generations. I have lived there since I was a child, and I am very attached to the region. Small as the city of Canarre may be, I have spared no effort to ensure that as many of its citizens may live in peace and prosperity as possible. I do not believe that I have accomplished that goal, and I have always intended to carry on my efforts until the day I die.”

Lumeire paused, and I waited for him to collect himself and carry on.

“But all that being said,” he eventually continued, “compared to Velshdt, Canarre is small. So small, in fact, that the two hardly bear comparison. Its populace is minuscule, and its towns are closer to hamlets. The scale of natural resources available to Canarre pales in comparison to those found in Velshdt. By all rights, I should be ecstatic to receive this offer...and yet, I cannot bring myself to feel any joy in it.”

“I understand how you feel. Painfully well,” I said.

Lumeire once again sunk into a lengthy silence. I watched him, my nerves fraying by the moment. I could appreciate just how conflicted he was about this

proposal, and several minutes passed before he spoke once more.

“Ars.”

“Yes, Your Lordship?”

“Do you have the ability to raise Canarre into the realm it deserves to be? Can you make it prosper?”

Lumeire gazed into my eyes. This wasn't the sort of question I could answer offhand, so I paused to mull over his words. Could I make Canarre prosper? It certainly wouldn't be an easy task...and yet, I felt that it was one I was capable of. I had the knowledge and wisdom of my followers on my side, as well as the latent talent that still slumbered undiscovered within Canarre's borders. If I could find everyone with talents to contribute and raise them to positions where they could make the most of them, I was confident that I could turn the county into a far better realm than it was at the moment. And so, I returned Lumeire's gaze and made my declaration.

“I can.”

Lumeire spent several seconds simply looking into my eyes. After that, his grim, serious expression gave way and his mouth curved into the slightest hint of a smile.

“Then I will become the Count of Velshdt. I leave Canarre in your capable hands.”





Side Story:

Rietz Muses the Mercenary

The town of Redroot was in the County of Cornlent, a relatively small district located in eastern Seitz, one of the duchies of the Summerforth Empire. Redroot was a small town in and of itself, and was in Cornlent's northeastern reaches.

Redroot was not a prosperous town. It was located in an arid stretch of land, and growing any crops at all was a struggle. What few buildings there were were old and decrepit, to the point that some looked liable to collapse on account of a stiff breeze. You could tell how impoverished the land was just by looking at its people. Most were poor, and many were beggars with no place to call home.

Rietz Muses was born in Redroot as the son of a slave. Rietz was a Malkan, an ethnicity that hailed from a land that had once fought and lost a war with the Summerforth Empire. In the fallout after the war's close, many Malkans were enslaved and brought back to the empire to serve their former foes. Free Malkans had gradually become a less uncommon sight as the ages passed, but the majority of the population that lived in the empire still lived lives of forced servitude.

Rietz's parents were both Malkan slaves, and as the children of slaves were enslaved upon birth, Rietz had been saddled with the same fate since the moment he came into the world. Never once could he remember having been treated as a human being in his youth. His meals were modest to an extreme, he was only fed the bare minimum that would keep him alive, and he was the subject of frequent whippings.

To make matters worse, Rietz's parents were unable to act as his guardians. His mother died of an illness when he was only four, and even during the period when she was alive, she hardly treated him as her beloved son. She had been compelled by her owners to give birth to a child, and if she held any affection for him, she never let it show. His father followed her to the grave two years later, dying of the very same sickness. He had never shown any interest in Rietz at all, and Rietz couldn't remember ever having so much as a single conversation with him.

The one family member Rietz did have a caring relationship with, his little sister, vanished without warning when he was seven. She hadn't died, from what he was able to gather, but she'd been taken away to some other town, never to return. Seven years into his life, he had already lost every single one of his blood relatives.

Then, after withstanding year after year of miserable abuse, Rietz was sold at the age of eleven. The person who owned Rietz was deep in debt, and he chose to auction off one asset after another in an attempt to stay financially stable. Rietz was just the next item on that list. He was left to languish in a slave trader's cell, waiting for someone to come along and purchase him.

"And here we have a Malkan child! He may be a brat, but he has some decent muscles on him—a fine pick for manual labor, I assure you! Best of all, his price tag: a mere silver piece, and the boy is yours! How about it?"

Rietz stood in a sales yard, his cage lined up alongside those of many other slaves. The slave trader had called out to a passerby and put a price on Rietz's life: a mere silver coin. He was not, it seemed, considered a luxury item.

"One silver, eh? Pretty cheap," muttered the man the slave trader was

speaking to. He had a frightful face, with scars on his forehead and cheek, and he stepped up to Rietz's cage to inspect the boy.

Just then, a short man who accompanied the man with the scars spoke up.

"Boss, this kid's a Malkan," he said. "You know what they say about *those*. He's inferior! No way we'll get any use outta him."

The so-called boss rested his chin in his hand as he stared at Rietz, his gaze seeming to penetrate through him.

"Oh!" said the short man. "Oh, I get it! You're thinking of using him for chores, eh? That's a job fit for a Malkan, for sure. And he *does* have a pretty face..."

"Save it, you oaf," said the boss. "That's a job for women. This one's a man, and that means he'll fight."

"Oh, for the—why *him*, then? Why not any of the others?" the short man protested.

The boss ignored him and turned back to the slave trader.

"Do you have anything cheaper than a silver?" he asked.

"No, I'm afraid he's our most affordable option," said the slave trader. "Malkans are the cheapest race, and he's the only one we have in stock today."

"Oh? Fine, then. I'll take him," said the boss.

"A-Are you kidding me, Boss?" said the short man.

"Why so upset? He'll make a decent enough decoy, and for a silver, that's all he'll have to be to pay off the investment. If he's good for anything else, that's just a bonus. Imagine if we bought one of the expensive ones and they turned out to be worthless! You wanna put us in the red? Our coffers aren't exactly full right now."

"I *know*, okay?" the short man sighed.

"Anyway, the decision's been made. Here's your silver," he said, flicking a coin to the slave trader.

"A pleasure doing business with you," the slave trader said. Just like that, Rietz found himself the property of a pair of men he'd never met before.

"All right, kid," said the boss. "You got a name?"

The men had taken Rietz to a nearby pub to question him. It had been quite some time since anyone had asked him for his name. Most people didn't pay any mind to the names of slaves at all, and it had been so long since he'd last had reason to say it out loud, it took a second before his name came to mind.

"Rietz Muses," he eventually said.

A number of dishes were laid out on the table that Rietz and the men were seated at. It was simple fare, but Rietz had been hungry for so long that it looked like a feast to him. His eyes were irresistibly drawn to the food, even as he spoke with the men.

"Rietz, eh?" said the boss. "Well, I'm Varrock Glade. I'm the leader of a band of mercenaries called the Flood. This here's Pentan, one of my men."

Pentan, who was seated to Varrock's side, had spent the whole time since they'd arrived looking down at Rietz and not saying a word.

"You're... 'mercenaries'...?" repeated Rietz. He hadn't received any sort of formal education up to that point, and he lacked many pieces of what most people would consider essential knowledge.

"Don't know what it means, eh?" said Varrock. "A mercenary's a man who

fights for his daily bread. I didn't buy you to use you as a slave—I bought you to join our crew. You'll be fighting by our side from now on."

"But...I've never fought anyone," said Rietz.

"You'll just have to learn the ropes, then. We'll say you have a month to get yourself into fighting shape. There are other ways we could use you, to be clear, but they'll get you killed before you know it, and I don't think either of us wanna see that happen. Dead men don't make me money, y'know?" said Varrock. His tone was blunt and level-headed, and Rietz could tell that if he failed to learn to fight, Varrock would think nothing of using him as a sacrificial pawn and letting him die in a ditch.

Rietz didn't know what sort of end was in store for him if he refused to fight, but one look at Varrock's expression told him on an intuitive level that it wouldn't be a pleasant one.

"How should I learn to fight?" Rietz asked.

"By practicing. No other way about it. Becoming capable enough to go into battle in a month's gonna be tough, though. You'd better train like your life depends on it," Varrock said flippantly before shoving a piece of bread into his mouth. Just then, Rietz's stomach let out a loud rumble.

"The food's for all of us, kid," Varrock said. "We'll keep you fed. Can't fight on an empty stomach, after all."

Rietz hesitated, wondering if it was all right for him to eat as well. Eventually, he reached a timid hand out toward his tableware and took a few cautious bites, then looked up to see how Varrock was reacting. Once it became clear that his new leader wasn't going to chastise him, Rietz started shoveling food into his mouth with wild abandon.

When the three of them had finished eating, Varrock stood up and dropped a coin onto the table to pay for their meal.

“That’s about all I have to say for now. Here’s hoping you don’t make me regret my purchase, kid,” he said, though the look on his face wasn’t particularly hopeful. No, it was the look of a man who expected that Rietz would be dead before he knew it.

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Rietz was led to the mercenary band’s gathering spot and was introduced to a few other members. None of them seemed to have very much interest in him, though for once, it wasn’t because he was a Malkan. Rietz was just a child, but he could still tell that their apathy stemmed from the fact that they expected him to die before long.

All Rietz could do was reflect on the fact that he’d been purchased by the most dangerous owner he could ask for. Getting whipped and forced to do menial labor for the rest of his life might’ve been better than the fate that awaited him here. Painful and miserable though that sort of lowly lifestyle would’ve been, at least he would’ve still been alive at the end of the day.

But if I just learn to fight...I’ll get to live.

Rietz went right up to Varrock and asked if there was a sword somewhere that he could use to train.

“Already feel like getting some practice in, eh?” said Varrock. “I like your attitude. There’s a bunch of ’em in the corner over there. Take your pick.”

A few old, weathered blades were indeed piled up in the corner. Rietz picked

one out for himself, then went outside to start swinging it about. At first he flailed wildly, failing to throw out a single decent blow, but in spite of his wiry frame, Rietz was surprisingly strong. Clumsy though his swings were, they were never out of control, even though the sword he'd chosen was by no means a light one. Varrock had no interest in helping Rietz with his training, and none of the other members had any interest in him in general. He was left to train on his own, practicing his swordsmanship for the rest of the day in solitude.

The next day went much the same way, but this time, Rietz was able to observe other members of the band as they went about their own training. He watched how they held and swung their swords, taking in every detail and trying to replicate their movements. Rietz's powers of perception and athletic abilities were exceptionally high, and it wasn't long before he'd copied the mercenaries' form to perfection. He improved at a breathtaking pace, gaining more and more skill with the blade.

"Oh...?"

A few days later, Varrock decided to check in on the band's newest member on a whim. He hadn't expected much out of Rietz, but when he saw the boy's swordsmanship and stance, he was taken aback.

"You've got a knack for this," Varrock said. "Have you always known how to swing a sword? No, they would've charged more than a silver if you did."

"He didn't know a blade from a pommel last time I watched him. Just look at him go now, though!" said another mercenary: a bald-headed man named Rayvill.

Rayvill was one of the more serious-minded members of their band, and he

made a habit of running through his sword drills on a daily basis. He was the first person who Rietz had tried imitating, and though Rayvill had shared his fellows' disinterest in the boy at first, his rapid and dramatic improvement caught the mercenary's attention.

"I just might've picked out a diamond in the rough," said Varrock with a grin.

The Flood was currently operating in the Redroot area, which had become exceedingly unruly as of late. Brigands roamed the roads freely, and public order was a thing of the past. Technically speaking, most of the local ruffians were former soldiers and deserters—in other words, not the sort of men one could take down in a fight with ease. Lacking a proper militia of his own, the Baron of Redroot had been forced to hire mercenaries in a last-ditch effort to restore some semblance of peace to his realm, and that was where the Flood came into the picture.

The baron was planning to set out on an expedition to eliminate as many bandits as he could in a few weeks' time, and Varrock's crew would accompany him. The more bandits he and his men eliminated, the better they'd be compensated for their efforts. If Rietz was an innately talented swordfighter, then Varrock had stumbled into a stroke of good fortune at just the right moment.

"If the boy's got talent, we'd better press him to the grindstone for real," said Varrock. "Hey, Pentan! You're in charge of training the brat."

"What, me?" said Pentan. "Gimme a break, Boss! He's got a knack, sure, but that don't mean he'll carry his weight on the battlefield."

Whether one was a talented swordsman and whether they could go out onto a battlefield and kill a man were two entirely different questions. Pentan had seen plenty of people panic and get themselves killed when it came time for the

real thing, and plenty more capable recruits turned tail and fled the second they had the chance.

“I don’t need you to tell me that, Pentan,” said Varrock. “But you know as well as I do that if he *does* end up being useful, it’ll be worth the effort we put in now, so just shut up and train the damn kid.”

Pentan let out a sigh.

“Fine, fine. You’re the boss, Boss,” he grumbled, then begrudgingly began teaching Rietz how to fight.

A few days passed by, and under Pentan’s tutelage, Rietz’s swordsmanship improved by leaps and bounds—though whether the man’s instructions were much help was up to question. Regardless, Pentan came to understand that as long as Rietz was capable of putting his skills to practical use, he’d be an immense asset on the battlefield.

One day, the whole band was called together for a meeting. The Flood consisted of a little less than a hundred men in total. It wasn’t a massive band, but it also wasn’t a small one by any means. A hundred men was just about average for mercenaries of their ilk.

Varrock stood before his band and began to speak.

“All right, people, tomorrow’s the big day. We’ve got a job, and the pay’s damn decent, all things considered! Our employer’s got it out for the bandits we’re going after, and he says he’ll throw in a bonus if we exceed expectations, so I expect every one of you to pull your weight!”

The assembled mercenaries broke out in a raucous cheer. A hefty payout meant good food and beautiful women would all be within reach, not to

mention all the other benefits that a purse full of coin could bring you. Knowing that their efforts would directly translate to a better pay rate boosted their morale like nothing else could.

Rietz, however, was a bundle of nerves. He'd grown capable enough to defeat several members of the band in practice duels, but this would be his first real battle, and there were too many unknown factors to count. He could hardly have been more uneasy about what was to come.

The members of the Flood went back to their own business when Varrock's speech was done, but Varrock stopped Rietz before he could get far.

"Oh, right. Hey, kid! I haven't given you your gear yet, have I? C'mere for a minute."

"My gear?" repeated Rietz.

"Can't fight without a blade, can you? I had some armor and a sword made for you."

This was the first that Rietz had heard of any such custom-made gear. Varrock had had his measurements taken a few days beforehand, but he'd explained nothing at the time and Rietz hadn't ended up asking what it was all about. Apparently, it was to size his suit of armor. Rietz followed Varrock, who soon presented him with a set of light armor designed for mobility and a rather shoddy one-handed sword.

"Try 'em on," said Varrock.

Rietz did as he was told and slid on the suit of armor. The measurements had been on point, and it fit him like a glove.

"By the way, those are coming out of your paycheck. In other words, you won't see a coin from me until they're all paid off."

“Huh?” Rietz blinked with shock. All of this came as a surprise to him, from the gear itself to the talk of it coming out of his pay.

“Quit gawking at me, kid. It’s only natural. Nothing comes free in this world, so get used to it,” said Varrock, leaving no room for Rietz to protest.

Surprised though he was, Rietz wasn’t opposed to the arrangement. It was certainly true that he couldn’t go into battle without a weapon and armor, and in his mind, the implication that he would be paid once he’d worked off the price of his gear was something to celebrate. Slaves didn’t get paid, and this was his first time even considering the possibility. He’d spent all his life on thankless drudgery, obeying his master’s orders without so much as a hint of reward.

“Considering the fact that you’re still a brat, I expect you’ve got a lot of growing left to do,” said Varrock. “You’ll have to get new gear when this stuff doesn’t fit anymore, so I wouldn’t get your hopes up about making decent coin any time soon. Not unless you work yourself to the bone, that is.”

Just as Rietz was coming to the conclusion that any pay was better than no pay, Varrock pulled the rug out from under him. It was true, though. The moment he hit a growth spurt, his perfectly-sized armor would stop fitting him, and having to replace it would likely consume all the money he earned and then some. After that brief moment of hope, Rietz was dejected to realize that his slave-like lifestyle wasn’t going to change any time soon after all.

And so, a new day dawned...and with it came Rietz’s very first battle.

Rietz's first battle was imminent. Varrock had led the rest of his band to rendezvous with the baron's army, and together, they would march into battle. The standing army of Redroot wasn't large by any means, numbering slightly larger than the Flood, and its soldiers didn't look well-equipped, either.

"Yeah, not a chance in hell these people could deal with all those bandits on their own," Varrock muttered to himself when the two forces met, just loud enough for Rietz to overhear him.

The army of Redroot wasn't led by the baron himself. Rather, one of his chief retainers served as their commander. He was a big, brawny man who looked like he knew his way around a battlefield, and he was famous enough in the region that a few of the Flood's members already knew his name: Ordovalle.

"Good, you're here!" bellowed Ordovalle in a voice loud enough that the people of the next town over might've heard him. "The time has come to set out and purge the filth that has sullied the peace and sanctity of Redroot's roadways! Follow me!"

What his men lacked in equipment, they seemed to make up for in enthusiasm. They let out a spirited cheer in response to Ordovalle's speech, then marched along after him. The Flood fell in behind the army of Redroot.

The combined force's destination was a hideaway used by the local bandit population. The baron had conducted an investigation in advance of this excursion, and had determined that the brigands were based out of the ruins of an old fort several miles away from the town. It was an ancient structure, and when it was constructed it had only been intended as a temporary fortification to protect Redroot's borders during a war. The fort had served its purpose well, but when the war ended and peace returned to the barony, it was deemed unnecessary and abandoned, only for bandits to take up residence within it

years later.

Having been abandoned an age ago, the fort had reportedly lost what few sparing defenses it had been given when it was first constructed. The bandits, however, seemed to have someone familiar with construction among their number, and they'd made renovations to restore it to a defensible state. Assaulting the stronghold wouldn't be easy, and that wasn't even taking into account the fact that there were a fair number of bandits holed up within it, all of whom were at least somewhat used to combat. Worse still, there was a chance that they'd gotten their hands on a catalyzer. If that was true, then the battlefield could descend into a magical death trap at any moment.

The soldiers marched onward, eventually pausing just a short distance away from the occupied fort. Ordovalle was a valorous man, but it had become apparent that he wasn't much for planning. Where some commanders would have stopped to formulate a strategy, he chose to spearhead a march on the fort, leading his troops directly toward it.

"That stupid son of a bitch," Varrock muttered as he watched Ordovalle begin his reckless advance. The commander's decision had caught Varrock by surprise. There was a very high risk that the bandits had set up traps in the area surrounding the fort, and while plowing through them may have been a costly but effective tactic if their force had a numerical advantage, they weren't working with an excess of men. Charging in without a plan was the height of foolishness.

Varrock paused for just a moment to mull over his options. Unfortunately, he wasn't much of a tactician himself, and in the heat of the moment, he failed to come up with any better ideas.

"To hell with it," he eventually shouted. "We're going in! Charge!"

If Varrock had allowed Ordovalle and his men to rush in on their own, and if they'd somehow managed to emerge victorious, it was very possible that the baron would choose to deny the Flood their payment. That was the one outcome that Varrock felt the need to avoid at all costs, so he followed along in Ordovalle's wake, leading his men in a madcap dash toward the fort.

The soldiers who had rushed ahead were already at the fort's walls. They'd put up ladders, and were climbing toward the ramparts. All things considered, the state of the battle seemed favorable as Varrock and his men closed in on the action. The bandits had been less than alert—possibly because their watchmen were sleeping on the job—and hadn't noticed the Redroot army until the absolute last second. They were taken by surprise, and Ordovalle's men had made it into the fort with ease before the bandits even began to mount a counterattack. It didn't feel like the bandits were even trying to mount a coordinated defense at all.

"Looks like luck's on our side, boys," said Varrock with a sneer. Nothing could be better for a mercenary than ending up on the right team in a one-sided battle. Not only would the odds of the Flood losing any men be low, but they'd also have the chance to crush their foes with impunity, earning spoils of war and extra pay in the process. That upside was doubly applicable in this case, since there was a fort to be raided. Varrock knew the bandits could have their loot squirreled away somewhere on the premises, and though the Redroot soldiers were required to turn their plunder over to Ordovalle, the Flood's men were under no such obligation.

All things considered, this job had the potential to be a windfall. The Redroot soldiers and the Flood's mercenaries alike were in high spirits as they fought through the fort, but Rietz alone was far too nervous for their morale to rub off on him. That was to be expected—it was, after all, his first battle. It was his first

time hearing a man's death wail, hearing the cheers and cries of battle, smelling the distinctive odor of cleaved flesh and fresh blood, and witnessing one man after another slain before his eyes. Each was a new experience, and all of them put together drove him to decide to flee.

Before Rietz had the chance to make a break for it, though, one of the bandits leaped out in front of him. The bandit held a sword at the ready, and swung it at Rietz without a hint of mercy or hesitation. Rietz dodged the blow effortlessly. For all his tension and distress, the movement came to him with ease. An observer might've thought him as calm as could be.

Rietz, as it turned out, was the sort of person who could get as nervous as possible without having his nerves manifest in his movements. If anything that tension proved helpful, narrowing his focus and allowing him to concentrate on the foe before him. Rietz watched the bandit, registered how he was moving, and knew what he had to do next.

The bandit swung his sword once more, but Rietz stepped back just enough to dodge the blade by a hair's breadth. Then, he stepped forward, thrusting his own sword toward his foe's neck. Rietz didn't hesitate. It wasn't that he felt no guilt for what he was about to do—just that the guilt wasn't enough to stop him from following through. Rietz had already learned that you couldn't show mercy on a battlefield, and although a storm of feelings flashed through his mind as he watched the bandit collapse, blood spraying from his lacerated throat, none of them had any impact on Rietz's movements, for better or worse. He seemed unfazed as he moved on to his next foe, swinging his blade once again.

Rietz fell upon his enemies, cutting down one opponent after another. He fought to stay alive, and he fought to prove his worth to Varrock. He grew accustomed to the chaos and death around him at an unbelievable speed.

Varrock and the rest of his band could fight without losing their nerve as well, but they had learned that skill after countless conflicts. Every one of them had needed time before they could set foot on the battlefield without feeling timid and terrified. Rietz, however, had gotten over that fear before his first battle was even finished. His skill with a blade was remarkable to begin with, but what truly made him a force to be reckoned with was his ability to fight to his fullest potential, no matter the circumstances.

The battle with the bandits was proceeding smoothly. Some of them attempted to flee, but any bandits who escaped were sure to turn up in the future to cause trouble all over again. Those who tried to run were chased, and those who tried to surrender were cut down without mercy.

“Don’t let a single man escape! Kill them all!” bellowed Ordovalle.

Rietz followed those orders to the letter, relentlessly pursuing the fleeing bandits. It was clear at a glance that he was faster than his prey, and one of the bandits soon realized that he wouldn’t be able to escape and spun around to fight for his life. The bandit wasn’t a skilled fighter, though, and after exchanging only a few strikes and parries with Rietz, he was disarmed, his sword clattering to the ground some distance away.

The bandit toppled to the ground, looking up at Rietz with tears in his eyes.

“P-Please, spare me,” the man whimpered, his voice trembling so dramatically that it was downright pitiful. Rietz hesitated. Could he kill a man who was weeping and begging for his life?

Who would notice if just one of them escaped? Rietz thought. He stepped back, turned around, and began walking away from the bandit...who took the opportunity to pull a knife from the breast of his shirt and lunge at Rietz. Rietz wheeled about, trying to raise his blade, but it was too late. He’d never make it

in time, and as the fact that he was about to die sank in, something flew past Rietz's face and slammed into the bandit's head. The bandit collapsed, and as Rietz looked down at his body he realized what the object was: a crossbow bolt.

"Thought you were doing a little *too* well for your first battle, but looks like you've got a long way to go after all," said Varrock as he walked over to Rietz, crossbow in hand.

"I saved you this time 'cause I think you'll be useful in the long run. I won't bother next time, though, so you'd better make sure this doesn't happen again," he added in his usual indifferent tone. "When you're on a battlefield, the only thing the people around you are thinking of is how to kill their enemy. That's all you have to think about, too. Don't forget it."

Those words had a profound impact on Rietz, and he would carry them to every battlefield he set foot upon.

○

The battle with the bandits ended in the Redroot army's one-sided victory. A number of the brigands who tried to flee were wiped out, and Ordovalle was quick to declare the expedition's success a result of his brilliant work as commander.

"Yeah, right. Luck won us the day, not your orders," Varrock muttered curtly. Plenty of bandits had managed to escape, and if Ordovalle had taken the time to plan the assault and form a perimeter around the fort, those escapees could have been apprehended and slain instead. In that sense, it was hardly a victory worthy of praise, in spite of the fact that it had been won with very few allied

casualties.

Varrock and his men went to report on the number of foes they'd slain and collect their payment for the battle. They had claimed quite a fair number of heads, and were expecting a hefty bonus, but Ordovalle had other ideas. According to him, the enemy had been routed in moments and the battle had barely taken any effort at all. He insisted that the battle had been won by his achievements before the Flood even took the field, and offered a payment lower than that which Varrock had been promised, let alone the bonus he'd expected.

Varrock was not the sort of man to take a claim like that lying down. He flew into a rage, insisting upon the payment he was promised, but Ordovalle wouldn't budge. Unfortunately for the Flood, an extended conflict between mercenary and employer would look worse for the mercenaries than it did for their client, and when all was said and done, Varrock gave in. The payment was substantial even after Ordovalle shaved it down, and it had been an easy enough battle that, from an effort to payout perspective, the mercenaries had still come out on top. The sight of the weighty sack of coin he was presented with was enough to quell Varrock's rage, and the conflict ended peacefully, if not amiably.

That night, the Flood descended upon a local pub en masse to make good use of their reward and indulge in an evening of drunken revelry. They'd earned enough to buy the pub out, drinking and eating to their heart's content in a raucous celebration.

"That Rietz, though!" said one of the mercenaries. "Looks like he'll be useful after all!"

“Never thought a Malkan could best one of us proper folk, but I know what I saw back there. Some of those bandits were no slouches, and he went toe to toe with ‘em!” said another.

Rietz had become the center of the band’s attention. He was a Malkan, and a child to boot, and everyone had assumed he’d never live long enough to pull his weight. Seeing him fight, however, had changed their minds in a flash, and most of the Flood was now confident that he’d be an asset they could count on for a long time to come.

Mercenaries like them were never wont to turn away a capable fighter. The stronger you were, the bigger your welcome would be. After all, more competent men on your side meant greater gains in battle and a lesser chance that you’d be killed. Plenty of them were prejudiced against Malkans, of course, and this by no means convinced them to change their views, but they were willing to make an exception if it would help them live another day.

“Eat up, new blood!” one of the mercenaries shouted.

Rietz looked out over the spread of food before him, and hesitated. This was the first time in his life he’d been welcomed anywhere, and the experience had left him bewildered. He’d been born a slave, and treated as subhuman throughout his whole life. Time after time he’d been told that Malkans weren’t people, and he’d expected the same sort of treatment from his new comrades-in-arms. This reception was completely out of left field for him, but in the end, he overcame his confusion and accepted their offerings, stuffing himself until he couldn’t eat another bite.

When the meal was over, the mercenary band’s men left Rietz behind to go off on their own. According to them, he was too young to appreciate whatever they were planning to do next. Rietz was confused, and it wasn’t until quite

some time later that he came to realize they'd gone to pay a visit to the local brothel. On that day, though, his exhaustion won out against his curiosity and he retired to his bed at the inn, where he fell asleep on his lonesome.

○

The Flood traveled from place to place, fighting battle after battle wherever they went. Rietz had thought that they were a local Redroot mercenary group at first, but as it turned out that was just a temporary home while they carried out their business in the region. The Flood's actual headquarters were located in the Duchy of Missian. They'd trekked out to Seitz for the Redroot job, but typically, their work took place within the borders of their home duchy.

Rietz fought well in his second battle, and then again in his third. Most of his pay was channeled into the cost of his gear, but he was also granted a pittance to spend however he saw fit. Rietz had no idea what he could use the money for, so for the moment, he decided to hide it away and start saving until he came up with a better idea.

Rietz took part in dozens of battles, and before he knew it, a year had come and gone since the day Varrock chose to buy him. Rietz had grown quite accustomed to combat over the course of that year. The more he fought, the more the constant conflict wore away at his body and soul, but he was alive, and he would keep fighting with all his strength to stay that way.

While Rietz was adapting to his life as a mercenary, the state of affairs in Missian was growing more and more turbulent. Missian was never a wealthy land to begin with, and as the circumstances of the region grew more and more

dire, its towns grew less and less safe. In a twist of fate, Missian's mercenaries were some of the few to be spared the pain of the economic strife. To them, after all, more conflict meant more opportunities to line their pockets.

Rietz was aware of the state of the world, and he found himself unable to come to terms with how it benefited him. Every day he wondered whether it was all right for him to stay his current course, but an answer was never forthcoming. He had nowhere else to go, for one thing, so dropping out from the Flood would leave him adrift. He had no choice but to keep fighting for whoever paid him to do so, even if that meant bringing misfortune and death to whoever they pointed him toward.

One day, as Rietz walked through the streets of a Missian town, he came across a trio of his fellow Flood mercenaries who seemed to be making a pass at one of the local girls. The girl was dressed in rags, and Rietz assumed she was one of the many impoverished locals. Her looks, however, contrasted with her outfit: she was a remarkably beautiful girl. She was also terrified, while the mercenaries' lascivious grins made their intentions very clear. It only took a glance to tell that she was *not* enjoying their company.

One of the mercenaries reached out for the girl's bosom, and the girl shrieked, "No! Please, leave me alone!" and swatted him away.

"What, a fighter, are we? Hah hah, works for me! The struggle just makes the payout all the sweeter!" said the mercenary with a sneer. He grabbed the girl, restraining her and preparing to drag her off somewhere. She kicked and flailed with all her might, but was unable to so much as faze him.

There were plenty of passersby in the street, but all of them turned a blind eye to the girl's plight. The Flood had fought alongside the local baron's forces

on a number of occasions, and had racked up a series of accomplishments in doing so that gave the baron a high opinion of them and their services. That meant he would turn a blind eye to the occasional misdeed they committed in his territory, and the people were well aware that attempting to intervene would bring them nothing but pain. Nobody could bring themselves to object.

Nobody, that is, except for Rietz, who stepped out in front of his comrades.

“Stop it, you three,” he said.

“Huh?” grunted one of the mercenaries. “Oh, it’s you, Rietz. Whaddya mean, stop it? We found her first, and you know what they say—finders keepers!”

“Or what, do you want in on the action? You’re still a bit young for this sorta fun, ain’t’cha?” said another of the trio.

“Trust me on this, kid, you’ll have a better first time if you leave it to a pro! Ha ha ha!” said the third.

The three of them cracked up, while Rietz’s irritation with them grew stronger still.

“That’s not it,” he said. “I’m saying that she doesn’t want this, so you should let her go.”

“Oh, come *on*,” groaned one of the mercenaries. “Who died and made you sheriff, eh? Decided you wanna be a hero like you see in your storybooks?”

“Ha ha ha! C’mon, not like all of us didn’t go through that phase too!”

“This isn’t funny!” snapped Rietz. “Just let her go and move along. I can’t believe you’d pick on a girl! Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves?!”

“Okay, simmer down, kid. We’re not gonna *eat* the li’l miss, for god’s sake! We’ll just have our fun, and she can run on home. No problems there, right?”

“Wrong,” Rietz growled. “I can’t just stand here and let you get away with this.”

Rietz stood fast. His comrades in arms had started out treating this like one big joke, but his uncompromising behavior was starting to get on their nerves. One of them even let out an exasperated sigh.

“Pain in the ass, I swear... Look, if we don’t have our way with her, someone else is gonna before you know it. Makes no difference if it happens now or later.”

“H-How can you be so sure about that?!” asked Rietz.

“‘Cause she’s a looker. Simple as that. Plus, she’s a pauper. She could vanish into the night, and nobody would bat an eyelash. No way a girl like her is getting left alone for long. It’s only a matter of time before some snatcher nabs her up and sells her off to some noble pervert, mark my words.”

“That’s not true, and even if it is, it’s no reason to not help her when I have the chance!”

“When’d you get this stubborn, anyway? If you’re not gonna see reason, I’m through with this. C’mon, boys,” he said, turning to leave and dragging the girl along with him.

“Hey! Wait!” shouted Rietz, but the mercenaries ignored him and just kept walking. Rietz could tell that words wouldn’t get through to them, which meant it was time for his last resort.

Rietz drew his sword and dashed out in front of the mercenaries, barring their path.

“O-Okay, seriously, kid?” said one of the mercenaries. “You’re one of ours, and you know our band has rules, don’t you?”

“That’s right!” shouted another. “Infighting’s banned, and you know it! You trying to get driven out?!”

The Flood didn’t have very many precise, concrete rules, but what few it had were taken seriously. Its members weren’t allowed to fight each other for personal reasons. Conflicts were to be reported to the boss, no exceptions, and when the rule was broken, whoever started the fight was liable to be expelled from the group. There were a few other rules as well—members were prohibited from committing crimes against each other, and picking fights with anyone the boss labeled as off limits was right out. This town was poor, it was worth nothing, had received no such special distinction, meaning that as far as the boss was concerned anything his followers did in it was their own business.



“Personal conflicts aren’t allowed, but as long as whoever picked the fight had a good reason, they can make an arrangement with the boss and not get driven out,” said Rietz. There were exceptions to every rule, and when one of the band’s members was humiliated by another member, or had one of their belongings stolen or broken, Varrock was known to sometimes side with the aggressor and decide that they’d had no choice but to resort to force. In those cases, the aggressor was absolved of their offense.

“And you’re saying that saving this girl’s a good reason? Try thinking that through one more time and see how it sounds to you, moron,” said the mercenary.

He wasn’t entirely off-base. What was and was not permissible was entirely at Varrock’s discretion, and harassing or assaulting townsfolk wasn’t in violation of any part of the Flood’s code of conduct. Varrock himself had stated that he didn’t give a damn, as long as nobody took their misbehavior too far. Judging by the boss’s words, the mercenaries were undoubtedly in the right, but Rietz still had no intention of standing down.

“You’re really not gonna let this go, are you?” asked one of the mercenaries.

“I’m not,” said Rietz.

“It’s three on one. You get that, right?”

“I do. What about it?”

The mercenary clicked his tongue in irritation. Rietz’s words were full of confidence, and his comrades knew that his combat ability was unmatched. The three of them weren’t remarkable fighters by their band’s standards, and there was a good chance that they’d lose, even if they all rushed him at once. Rietz, meanwhile, was incensed, and it was obvious he was in no mood to see their

side of things. If they fought him, there was a very real chance they'd come out of the encounter maimed, or even dead. Fearing the worst, the men came to a silent consensus and let the girl go.

"Hmph," snorted one of the men. "You'll live to regret this, brat. The boss is gonna hear you drew your sword on us."

With those parting words, the three mercenaries went on their way. Somehow, Rietz had managed to save the girl, who was now sitting on the ground in a daze.

"Are you all right?" asked Rietz, offering a hand that the girl did not accept. She stood up on her own and fled without saying a word. Rietz caught a glimpse of her face before she went, and he recognized the meaning of the expression she gave him: it was one of clear contempt.

Speechless, Rietz could only stand there and watch her leave. In that moment, he remembered that being a Malkan made him an object of prejudice and loathing. Mercenaries didn't care what race you were as long as you could fight, but the rest of the world saw things differently, and outside of the bubble he'd been living in, Rietz was someone society looked down upon. The prejudice was so ingrained that the average person would despise him, even if he'd saved them from a terrible fate mere moments prior.

Rietz hadn't saved the girl because he was hoping she would thank him. Still, her contempt left a wound upon his heart that would not heal for a very long time.

“So? If you have an excuse, let’s hear it.”

The moment Rietz made it back to the Flood’s current base, Varrock called him over for a talk. The subject, of course, was how Rietz had drawn his sword on his fellow mercenaries earlier that day. Nobody was hurt in the end, but baring steel on an ally was still an unmistakable violation of the group’s social standards.

“They were trying to do something awful, so I stopped them. That’s all,” said Rietz.

“And you think that gave you a good enough reason to draw on them?”

Rietz nodded without hesitation.

“Frankly, I don’t give a damn about what happens to some filthy little street lass. I think what the three of them were trying to do was pure idiocy, but being an idiot’s not against our rules. No matter what happened to the girl, it wouldn’t have been any problem for the rest of us.”

“Still, I had to help her!” shouted Rietz.

“Let me remind you that my word is law here. Whatever you *had* to do isn’t my problem,” snapped Varrock with an icy glare that he maintained until Rietz stopped trying to protest. “Look, kid, we’re not heroes.”

Rietz hung his head in silence, and Varrock carried on.

“Smacking down thugs isn’t our job. Our job is to go into battle and kill our enemies. If you want to be a knight in shining armor, then you’re not cut out for mercenary work. Save us all the trouble and go find some lord to serve.”

Serving a lord.

Rietz knew very well how unachievable of a goal that was for him.

“Not that anyone would take in a Malkan like you, ‘course,” Varrock continued, echoing Rietz’s thoughts.

Rietz couldn’t bring himself to say a word in his defense. He knew that no matter how much he polished his skills, the thought that a nobleman would choose him was the stuff of pure fantasy.

“You’re tough. Smart, too. But there isn’t a lord out there whimsical enough to take a Malkan into their household. You’ll never be anything other than a mercenary,” said Varrock, driving home the cold truth of the matter. Rietz understood that even if he couldn’t stand the way his fellow mercenaries behaved, this was still the only place he’d ever be accepted. “Nobody got hurt this time, so I’m willing to just let it go. I paid to bring you into this crew, after all—no sense wasting that money. There won’t be a next time, so tread lightly. Oh, and apologize to those three next time you see ‘em.”

The thought of apologizing to the men who tried to do something so foul, needless to say, didn’t sit right with Rietz at all. If he lost his place in the company, he’d lose the only means he had left to live. The way the girl he saved had scorned him made Rietz understand how impossible it was for a Malkan to get by in an empire that despised his people. No matter how much he hated it, this was the only place that would accept him, and no matter how hard he argued his case, he knew Varrock would never lend him an ear. Left with no other option, Rietz swallowed his pride and went out to apologize to the other mercenaries.

Varrock scowled as he watched Rietz leave his chamber.

“Brat really pisses me off sometimes,” he muttered to himself. “It’s like looking at my own damn self from back in the day.”

Varrock thought back to days long past, remembering the man he used to be. In the present day, those memories brought him nothing but irritation.

“Least he gave up nice and easy, though. Could tell by the look in his eyes,” he continued. When Rietz had gone out to find and apologize to his comrades, Varrock had felt assured that the boy had given up entirely.

“Hmph... Son of a bitch,” Varrock muttered. The scars on his face throbbed faintly.

Ever since that day, Rietz stopped questioning the actions of his fellow mercenaries, no matter what they did. He turned a blind eye to their every deed, however distasteful they might have been. He never joined in on the wrongdoing himself, but he was under no illusions as to his culpability. By ignoring the misdeeds of his fellows, he felt he was just as guilty as they were. He simply didn’t have the courage to protest. Rietz wasn’t brave enough to stand up against the lifestyle he hated and risk losing the one place he could call home.

When he was on the battlefield, though, Rietz could forget everything. He could devote his mind to killing, and killing alone. He focused solely on cutting down his foes, just as Varrock had taught him to.

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Another year came and went. Two and a half years had now passed since Rietz joined the Flood, and though he was still young, he had grown into one of the most capable fighters in the band. The Flood’s reputation had risen in turn,

and as its name spread, more and more members began to join. They had yet to participate in a major war, however, and most of their work consisted of hunting down bandits and other similar small-scale engagements. The Flood was still far from famous, even in Missian alone.

Rietz's skills had improved, but the lingering doubt of whether it was all right for him to keep living the mercenary life weighed on him.

This is stupid. I shouldn't even be questioning it, he thought to himself over and over. Every time, he reached the same answer: *It doesn't matter whether or not it's okay for me to do this. It's my only option.*

The Flood was the only place that would accept Rietz for who he was. That was the truth, and it was inescapable.

I have a bad feeling about this, though. Varrock's gotten too desperate to spread our name...

Mercenary bands lived and died on name recognition. The more famous a band was, the more work came in for them. The Flood was plenty capable, but they simply didn't have enough accomplishments under their belt to get that kind of recognition. Large-scale conflicts that a band like theirs could have a substantial impact on were few and far between, and so far, none of their jobs had led to the sort of publicity they needed.

Varrock believed that his men were capable of pulling off a big job on a proper battlefield, and he would boast about their capabilities at the slightest provocation, but for all his talk he never seemed to bring in anything other than bandit hunting or supporting minor nobility in skirmishes with their neighbors. Small jobs still paid, so his livelihood was never at risk, but the Flood was hardly prospering. To Rietz, Varrock seemed dissatisfied with his current lot, and it felt like he was in a hurry to find the sort of job that would propel his band into the

limelight he believed they deserved.

One day, Varrock called the band together for a meeting. Judging from past precedent, Rietz knew that probably meant he'd found a job for them. That was just about the only reason Varrock ever called meetings on short notice.

Sure enough, when everyone assembled the first words out of Varrock's mouth were "We've got a job, boys!" He was grinning as he said it, which took Rietz by surprise. The job itself wasn't a shock, but Varrock was almost always in a sour mood. Cheerfulness was very much the exception for him.

"It's a big one, too," Varrock continued. "We're finally getting the chance we've been waiting for!"

That explained his good mood. Varrock had spent day after day wishing that a big job would come his way, and it seemed that wish had been granted. Small wonder he was excited to tell everyone about it.

"Seems some petty baron in a backwater county called Upusna's staged an uprising. We've been called in to put him down," Varrock explained.

The County of Upusna was in the far northeastern reaches of Missian. It was a small county, and as Rietz absorbed the details of the mission, he found himself questioning whether this was a big job at all. A lord in a territory that minor wouldn't have much in the way of a standing army to his name, so it seemed unlikely they'd have to engage in any large-scale battles.

Rietz wasn't the only one with doubts, and the others were far less hesitant to voice them.

"You call *that* our big break?" jeered one of the gathered mercenaries.

"We might be up against a petty lord, but that petty lord's saved up a fine

stack of coin,” Varrock argued. “He’s hired mercenaries of his own, and a sizable troop at that. All told, he’s got quite the fighting force to his name—enough to rival the Count of Upusna’s standing army. Seems that count doesn’t want to have to go to the other lords in the county for help, so he decided to call on us instead.”

A force large enough to rival a count’s army would certainly have to be rather substantial. Rietz still wasn’t convinced that this was the chance Varrock had been waiting for, but it would result in a larger-scale battle than the skirmishes with bandits they’d been dealing with up to that point.

“If one of us takes down a bigshot in battle, they’ll be singing our praises across the duchy before we know it! And that’s not even starting on the coin—this’ll be the biggest payout we’ve ever seen! Get ready, people! We’re making it big!”

The gathered mercenaries joined Varrock in a triumphant roar of excitement. Rietz, however, remained silent as he looked on. A discomforting feeling that this wouldn’t go well was beginning to brew within him. He just couldn’t shake the feeling that this battle was a trap, and that the Flood was about to walk right into it.

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It took the Flood a few weeks to make their way to the County of Upusna. Rietz’s bad feeling about the mission remained as present and ominous as ever, but the rest of the band was raring to go and he knew it wasn’t a good idea to rain on their parade without any conclusive evidence that something was

wrong. He kept his premonition to himself, trying to convince himself it was all in his head.

The Flood's destination was the city of Upusna: the county's capital and namesake. When they arrived, they found a city that was clearly not ruled over by a lord with much money to his name. The keep was old and decrepit, and the surrounding town was hardly thriving. It was clear at a glance that the forces of commerce hadn't blessed the county with much in the way of prosperity, but perhaps that was a given. If the count had been rich, after all, he would've reached out to a more well-reputed band of mercenaries than the Flood.

The band soon met with the Count of Upusna himself, Terrence Prantory. Terrence was a heavyset, middle-aged man who looked like he'd never set foot on a battlefield in his life. Despite the dire economic conditions his county was coping with, the count was dressed to the nines in an expensive outfit that told Rietz his subjects' taxes were not being spent to further their interests.

"I welcome you to my home, fine men of the Flood! And my, what a capable band of men you...hm? I say, isn't that a Malkan?" Terrance began, then paused to scowl as his gaze fell upon Rietz.

"He might not look it, but the boy's got as good a sword arm as you'll ever see. I'd appreciate it if you'd turn a blind eye to him, Your Lordship," said Varrock.

"Hmm? Well, it hardly matters. The situation is urgent, so without further ado, I'll explain what it is I need you to do."

Terrance gestured to one of his servants, who spread out a map of the local area. They'd only just met the count, and he was already launching into an explanation of the battle to come.

“Frankly, the state of things is dismal,” said the count. “The revolt sprung out of nowhere, and the rebels claimed a number of essential strategic points before we could do anything to bolster our defenses. They have momentum on their side, and we must do our utmost to ensure it does not last! We believe their next target will be here: Fort Bazul. We must defend that fort to the last, no matter what it costs us!”

The Flood had never fought a defensive battle before, at least since Rietz joined. As such, this would likely be most of its members’ first experience fighting on those terms. More so than that, Rietz was struck by just how much worse the situation was than he’d anticipated. They’d been told that the count had called them in to save face, not wanting to ask the lords beneath him for their assistance, but that story didn’t line up with Terrance’s explanation. If the situation was that bad, saving face would be the last thing on his mind. Varrock, however, had no interest in giving the count advice he hadn’t asked for and accepted his explanation without protest.

“Needless to say, we’ve prepared a lavish reward for whichever band of mercenaries contributes the most to our cause,” said Terrance as he brandished a hefty-looking bag, pulling out a handful of gold coins to show off to the Flood. It was a tremendous amount of gold for the count of a realm so clearly impoverished to be offering, which went to show how desperate he was for a way out of the corner he’d been driven into.

The mercenaries, for their part, looked at the sack of gold with greed and glee in their eyes. Varrock was comparatively composed—after all, to him fame was just as important as money, if not moreso. Whatever their reasons, the band’s morale was high across the board as they set out for Fort Bazul, accompanied by several other groups of mercenaries and the Upusnan army.

The Flood filed through the gates of Fort Bazul. Being an important strategic point for the county's defenses, the fort had been built to weather any assault. Unfortunately, it had also been built quite a long time ago and had gone through very little in the way of repairs or improvements since. The modern battlefield was dominated by magic, a force that hadn't had any tactical application when the fort was built, and whether or not its walls would stand up to a magical barrage was unclear.

A few days after the Flood arrived at the fort, the enemy force went on the attack. The rebellion had been staged by House Rudasso, a long-established noble family in the region. The Rudassos had never had an especially good reputation, and as chaos swept across the empire, rumor had it they'd been scheming and maneuvering their way toward greater power via less than legitimate means.

They'd supposedly tried to carry out a plan to delegitimize House Prantory, the current count's family, but the plan had failed and their plot was exposed for the world to see. This rebellion was their last-ditch effort to avoid the sanctions they'd otherwise face. It seemed impossible that the Rudassos hadn't realized that even if they managed to succeed and unseat House Prantory, the Duke of Missian would put them and their ambitions to rest before they knew it. Still, the Rudassos were intent upon fighting to the bitter end.

The rebels descended on the fort in a frantic assault. Their morale was high, and their commanders seemed quite competent as well, making them a force to be reckoned with. House Prantory's commanding officers were no slouches

either, issuing orders with speed and precision, and they held the advantage in terms of numbers.

The majority of Rietz's combat experience so far had been against groups of bandits. This was, from a certain perspective, his first time participating in a real, all-out battle. No matter how the particulars of the battlefield changed, though, Rietz's job was always the same: kill the enemy before they killed him. That was all there was to it. He'd cut down a soldier who was trying to gain a foothold within the fort, then move on to the next. And the next. And the next.

Rietz aside, the members of the Flood were riding unusually high in anticipation of their reward, and were making great contributions to the state of the battle on the whole. Varrock's efforts in particular stood out among the rest. He tended to go into battle with a lackadaisical attitude, but today, he fought with the strength and ferocity of a demon taken human form. Rietz had never seen Varrock fight with all his might before, and he was stunned to learn just how dangerous his boss could be when the need arose.

"Gods be damned," muttered one of House Prantory's soldiers. "Who the hell are those people?"

"Mercenaries," said another. "Call themselves the Flood."

"The Flood? Never heard of 'em."

"Well, their boss is a monster! Dunno how the hell someone like him's gone this long without getting any attention."

"Did you see the Malkan, though? He's a monster in his own right! Weren't they supposed to be inferior, or something?"

House Prantory's men were in awe at the Flood's work, though they were no slouches themselves. The tide of battle was steadily flowing in the defenders'

favor, and as the enemy's soldiers fell one after another, their morale began to plummet. They'd started out with absolute confidence that the fort would be theirs, but as the battle carried on and they made no progress toward capturing it, their confidence declined. Eventually, their commander judged that taking the fort was a lost cause and ordered a retreat.

"The enemy flees! Victory is ours!" cried one of the defenders. Since defending the fort was the operation's entire goal, the enemy's retreat signaled their victory in an instant, and the defending soldiers let out an ear-splitting roar of victory.

"I suggest that we pursue the enemy, Lord Terrance," Varrock suggested, keeping his cool even while everyone around him celebrated.

"*Pursue* them?" said Terrance. "Well, it would be wonderful to end their little rebellion here and now, but my forces are exhausted. You and yours have fought well too—no shame in taking a rest, don't you think?"

"We may have won this battle, but the enemy's army is far from spent," Varrock countered. "If we press the advantage now, we could reduce their numbers and skew the odds of the war on the whole in our favor."

"You make a compelling case...but as I said, my men have been fighting for days on end! They're far too worn out to pursue the enemy now," said Terrance. The count showed no interest in following Varrock's advice.

"Fine, then... In that case, the Flood will pursue the enemy on our own."

"You can't be serious," said Terrance. "The enemy may be on the retreat, but they do still have a whole army at their disposal! You have many daring warriors in your band, I'll admit, but chasing them down on your own would still be far too dangerous!"

“There may be a lot of them, but an army that’s been routed is little more than a disorganized mob. They’ll never get the better of us in that state,” said Varrock with an air of absolute confidence.

Rietz was shaken by his leader’s attitude. The attack he was proposing was as high-risk as they came, and obviously so. It was true that pulling it off would put them in the count’s good graces and further bolster their reputation, but the Flood had already distinguished themselves in battle. In Rietz’s mind, pushing their luck in a needless pursuit was greedy to the point of foolishness.

One look at the rest of the Flood, however, proved that Rietz was the only one who harbored such apprehensions. His comrades had worked themselves up into an ecstatic frenzy.

“You heard the boss!” one of the mercenaries shouted. “We’ll slaughter the lot of ’em!”

“We’re not just gonna let the bastards get away, are we?!” yelled another.

Not one of them had stopped to consider what would happen if their excursion failed. Rietz was certainly in no position to convince them to stop, though as their employer, Terrance could have ruled out the attempt with a single word, and Varrock would have had no choice but to obey. Rietz looked to Terrance, hoping against hope that the lord would see reason.

“Well, if you’re that enthusiastic, I see no reason to stop you! Give the enemy what for!”

Rietz’s hopes were dashed, and the Flood set out to pursue the retreating enemy force without delay.

The Flood chased after their foes with the utmost of zeal, Rietz aside. The

mercenaries had gotten so carried away after their initial victory that they seemed utterly fearless.

Varrock is usually more composed than this, Rietz thought. Why is he this desperate to prove himself in this battle?

The more the Flood's name spread, the better the jobs it'd be offered, and the easier it would become for its members to live in relative luxury. This job was already set to pay out a hefty reward, though—enough to live on for some time, and in comfort at that—and Varrock had never been one to splurge in the first place. He never accompanied his men to the brothels, and he never overindulged in food or drink, either. He maintained his weapons and gear, of course, so he spent *some* money, but Rietz had never gotten the impression he was desperate for cash.

But if he's not after money...what does he want out of this?

Mercenaries fought for money. If there was any other purpose that could drive someone to live this life, Rietz couldn't think of it.

Under Varrock's command, the Flood charged forward, their spirits as high as could be. Before long, they sighted the fleeing enemy force in the distance. The moment Rietz caught sight of them, alarm bells began ringing in his head. They looked unaware and defenseless, so much so that it felt unnatural. They showed absolutely no sign of realizing that the Flood was drawing near, and while it was plausible that an inept army could be that unobservant, the way they'd fought back at the fort proved that they were anything but incapable.

Rietz wasn't well-versed in tactical theory, and even though he could feel that something was wrong, he had no idea what exactly it was that the enemy was attempting to do. Varrock, meanwhile, saw the enemy's inattentiveness as the perfect opportunity and ordered his men to charge. As they raced toward the

enemy's back ranks, their soldiers spun about in unison to face the mercenaries. It wasn't the sort of move they could've managed off the cuff—they'd known the Flood was coming, and they were prepared for it.

The mercenaries were taken by surprise, but not nearly enough to convince them to call off the attack. Moments later, a pair of soldiers emerged from out of nowhere, each of them holding a small catalyzer: mages. The road the Flood had been charging along happened to cut between two small hills, giving the mages the perfect location to stage an ambush.

"Mages?! Fall back!" Varrock frantically shouted. However, it was too late. The mages unleashed their spells, sending countless bolts of magical fire raining down upon the Flood.

The enemy mages weren't very skilled, but the Flood didn't have a single mage to its name, and they lacked the ability to defend against magical attacks in any capacity. They were perfectly vulnerable to this sort of attack, so it proved most effective. The mercenaries fell in droves, burning alive in the blink of an eye.

Rietz managed to dodge and weave his way through the rain of fire. It felt more like a miracle had spared his life than he'd saved it himself, really.

"Ugh," groaned Varrock. Rietz's eyes fell to the band's leader. His leg had been pierced through by a bolt of flame, and it was obvious he wouldn't be walking any time soon.

If Rietz left him there, Varrock would be killed for sure. Fleeing alone would have raised the odds of Rietz's survival. And yet, Rietz chose to stop and save Varrock. There were plenty of ways in which he didn't see eye to eye with the man, but when all was said and done, he saw Varrock as his savior—as the man who'd given him a place where he belonged.

Rietz dashed through the firebolts, made it to Varrock, hoisted the man onto his back, and then fled as fast as his legs could carry him. Proving that desperation can trigger inhuman feats of strength, Rietz ran at an incredible pace despite carrying a fully grown man. Unbelievable though it was, Rietz managed to escape from the flaming death trap and flee for his life.

○

A few hours had passed, and night had fallen. Rietz's adrenaline-driven sprint was far from sustainable, and when fatigue began to set in, he'd found a nearby watering hole to stop and rest at.

Varrock's leg was in a terrible state. He'd suffered horrific burns across the rest of his body as well, and his injuries were clearly debilitating. Finding the watering hole had been a stroke of luck that helped him hold on, but in his current state, it wouldn't have been surprising if he'd dropped dead at any moment.

"Why didn't you leave me?" asked Varrock, who was just barely clinging to consciousness.

"Because I owe you. I couldn't abandon you," said Rietz.

"You owe me? Since when? I bought you 'cause I thought you'd be useful. There was nothing else to it."

"I know, but that's not what I meant. I feel indebted to you on a personal level, that's all."

"Hmph," Varrock grunted derisively. "Well, one way or another, you wasted your time. I won't last much longer."

“Wh-Why would you say that? You can’t know that for sure!”

“Oh, I know. It’s my body, and I know it better than anyone. Maybe I’d pull through if I made it back to the fort and got treated, but I’m sure as hell not walking, and you’d need at least three days to drag me there. It’d take more than one miracle for me to last that long. It ain’t happening, kid.”

Varrock spoke of his own death with brazen indifference. If he was scared to die, he didn’t let it show.

“Considering how things looked back there, I’m not the only one who’s not making it out,” Varrock continued. “I’d say eight outta ten of us didn’t make it. The Flood’s finished.”

“H-How can you be so casual about this?!” snapped Rietz. “You might die, you know? Don’t you care?!”

“What, you were expecting me to kick up a wailing fit about it? What kinda pathetic excuse of a mercenary would go out on a note like that? Leave the sobbing and pissing to the nobles and merchants who’ve never had to risk their lives—I won’t have it,” Varrock spat. It was a tone Rietz could never have imagined hearing from a man who knew his death was close at hand.

“I really blew it this time, though. I always knew that getting greedy would bring me nothing but pain, and look at me now... Hah... Hah hah,” Varrock weakly chuckled.

Rietz could tell just by watching Varrock that he was right. He clearly wasn’t long for this world.

“Y’know what, Rietz?” Varrock muttered. “I was a slave too, back in the day, just like you.”

“What?” said Rietz, eyes widening in shock. Varrock had never told him

anything of the sort before.

“The one difference is that I ran away on my own. Stole the key, popped my shackles, and made a break for it,” Varrock continued, paying no mind to Rietz’s astonishment. “Never wanted to live a mercenary’s life. Thought I could really make something of myself, but they don’t teach slaves the skills a man needs to live an honest life. Mercenary work’s all I could manage, and honestly, I wasn’t even cut out for it. Killing for money, watching the folks I fought beside act like petty crooks—I hated every goddamn second of it. Still, I put up with it. I just kept going, and going, and holding it all in, and before I knew it, I didn’t feel anything at all anymore. ’S not that I got used to it. It broke me. My heart couldn’t take much more of it.”

As Varrock spoke about his past, Rietz’s mental image of the man fell to pieces. Every word of his story was so far afield of his expectations that he almost couldn’t believe it.

“Even after all that, I still had one last shred of ambition. I wanted to be a nobleman. I thought that if I got my name out there, if my band of sellswords got famous enough, then somebody somewhere might decide to toss me a scrap of land and a title to go with it. And here I am, for all the good that wish did me.”

At long last, Rietz understood why Varrock had always been so fame-hungry. The Summerforth Empire had entered an era of turmoil, and men who could fight were sought after no matter where you went. Well-known mercenaries being granted noble titles was hardly unheard of in the modern age.

“You’re like me, Rietz,” Varrock continued. “You’re no mercenary. You’re not cut out for it. And if you don’t wanna end up like me, you’d better put this life behind you.”

“But...I don’t have any other choice,” said Rietz.

“You’re a Malkan, all right. There’s not a man out there who wouldn’t look down on you for it. But you’re also strong, and there’s not a man out there who can deny that. You’re strong, and smart, and it’s only a matter of time ’fore you find someone with the sense to notice it.”

“You don’t know that...”

“Who knows?” said Varrock. “Maybe some nobleman out there with a good eye and no common sense’ll pick you outta the crowd and give you the job you deserve.”

“N-No, that’s just not possible.”

“*Everything’s* possible. That’s the sorta world we live in. Nobody knows what’ll happen next,” said Varrock as he looked Rietz in the eye.

Rietz knew that the fantasies his leader was describing were unfeasible, but somewhere, deep down, he hoped that Varrock was right.

“All right, that’s enough of that. Time for you to leave my sorry corpse behind and get back to the fort.”

“What? No! I can’t!” shouted Rietz.

“Just shut up and listen... Carrying me along with you would take more stamina than you’ve got. I doubt you’ve even noticed how much carrying me this far took outta you. Way I see it, you might not make it back at all, and that’s not even mentioning that the enemy might be out there looking for us. If you’re hauling me along, you won’t stand a chance of getting away. There’s a thousand risks to taking me with you, and not one damn merit. I’d drop dead halfway there regardless.”

“Th-That can’t be true! Just look how much you’ve been talking to me! If you

can talk that much, you can hold on until we get to the fort!”

“I’ve only managed to talk this much ’cause I’m not worrying ’bout saving what strength I’ve got left. Just go, kid.”

“I...I won’t!” Rietz shouted, then hoisted Varrock onto his back and started walking once more.

“H-Hey! Dammit, kid, I told you to leave me behind!” Varrock exclaimed. However, Rietz didn’t even respond, and just kept walking.

“Peh,” Varrock spat. “Suit yourself, idiot.”

Varrock seemed to give up and stopped trying to protest, while Rietz plodded on and on, one step after the next. Varrock was bigger and heavier than he was, but still Rietz walked, bearing both of their weight. Exhausted though he was, he never stopped.

By the time he reached the fort, having miraculously evaded the enemy force’s search parties, Varrock was already dead.

Roughly twenty members of the Flood made it out of the engagement alive. Most of the survivors returned to the fort missing a hand, or a leg, or their vision. Losing a hand wasn’t a death sentence for a mercenary, but going blind or losing a leg meant the end of your career, no question about it.

Out of all the remaining members, only seven could even consider continuing to live as mercenaries, Rietz included. Perhaps they would’ve done just that, carrying on as the Flood and clawing their way back up to their former glory...if Varrock had survived. With their leader dead, however, what little hope they had left died as well, and the Flood disbanded for good.

Rietz took Varrock’s final words to heart and chose not to seek employment

with another mercenary band. He traveled here and there, all over Missian, but no matter where he went, nobody was willing to give a Malkan like him a chance. He still had the savings from his time as a mercenary, so he was able to eat, at least. Most towns were home to at least one merchant who was willing to sell him food, albeit usually at a steep markup.

The longer Rietz wandered, the closer he came to the limit of his endurance. Eventually, he found himself in Canarre, a remote county on Missian's border. There, like everywhere, Malkans were scorned and despised. He had hit his breaking point, and was just coming to the conclusion that living as a mercenary was his only choice after all...

"I'd like you to become my retainer!"

...when he crossed paths with a peculiar child who spoke with an oddly adult-like affect, and everything changed.



Author

Miraijin A

This is Miraijin A speaking! Thank you very much for purchasing the third volume of this series. This volume centers around a war, so you can expect the plot developments to be a bit more serious in tone than those of the previous volumes. I hope you enjoy it!

Illust.

jimmy

I'm the illustrator, jimmy! I tried going to a movie on my own for the first time recently, and I've gotta say, I really recommend it! I'm looking forward to seeing more movies when things calm down around here.

As a Reincarnated Aristocrat, I'll Use My Appraisal Skill to Rise in the World 3

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